

# CIVIL RELIGION'S EFFECT ON EDUCATION FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

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Civil religions, alongside beliefs of specific faith communities, shape attitudes and actions of individuals and of entire peoples. American civil religion, with its presumption of entitlement to global dominance, presents a particular problem. This paper intends to examine the formative nature and role of American civil religion in our common international search for justice and peace.

American civil religion continues to evolve as a complex systematic theology with an inadequate ecclesiology for a nation professing to be an inclusive, democratic, just, peace-seeking nation. With lack of clarity about its formative role, its power is underestimated. Current battles over its national role have international consequences.

I am hesitant to write specifically about American civil religion, because Americans err grossly in their presumptive viewpoint. Even the use of the word “American” symbolizes the problem, disregarding the many countries of North, South and Central America. I also recognize that it is a common term used not only within the United States, but in referring to the United States of America around the world, so I use it in this paper, interchangeably with “United States.” My writing on such a topic might seem to only further this myopic stance. My intent, however, is exactly the opposite: to examine American civil religion as a *basis* for this arrogant presumption, a bias which disregards, dominates, and is therefore a dangerous impediment to global justice and peace.

My premise is that we as religious educators, serving in diverse settings, cultures and nations, need to help create safe, trustworthy places for us to be different together in the public world, in a global community, in order for justice and peace to flourish. This includes teaching for peace and justice *within* our perspective faith communities and working together for just public education for *all*. The word “public education” has different meanings (different relationships of church and state) in different contexts. My particular research has focused on the United States; however my inquiry and observation has included Newfoundland, South Australia,<sup>1</sup> Tasmania, Tanzania, and Namibia.

The study of civil religion is not often joined with the subject of education or religious education, but I believe that not only does civil religion impact education, but that the educational arena is a place to examine the civil religion. Within the United States, the historic Protestant bias, the battle over school prayer, bussing, text books, “creationism,” and the fight for control of local school boards has mirrored each unresolved issue in American civil religion. School violence reflects the United State’s creed of violence, even while it *believes* it holds a creed of “peace.”

I come to this subject as a theological professor who teaches courses in the fields of educational ministry and church leadership at a Lutheran (ELCA) seminary in the United States. My interest in American Civil Religion (ACR) relates to religious formation and ecclesiology. In the seminary classroom—and in congregations—I do not present a political stance (either

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<sup>1</sup> Many books from these and other countries explore what might or might not be the equivalent of a civil religion; for example, Brian Howe and Alan Nichols, *Spirit of Australia: Religion in Citizenship and National Life* (Hindmarsh, SA: Australian Theological Forum, 2001).

criticizing or applauding ACR), but use a methodology of discovering the holy days, shrines, holy writ, hymns, symbols, saints and martyrs, priests, prophets, rituals, gods, creeds, and mission of civil religion. American Civil Religion is a living, ever-changing, controversial religion. I welcome international conversation on the role of American Civil Religions in the global context as we search for peace. I want to learn from my colleagues about the phenomenon of "civil religion"...by whatever term... from different national and ecclesial experiences.

In this paper I shall: 1) Present the concept, history and development of American Civil Religion; 2) Discuss how the United States has depended upon the public school to inculcate the civil religion; 3) Show twelve components of American civil religion, which correspond to those of specific faith communities, giving examples from news at the time of writing this paper; 4) Pose challenges for us as religious educators.

### **American Civil Religion**

Civil religion exists in many societies. The term appears in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* in the context of his larger interest in the legitimacy of the social bond. Rousseau proposed that social cohesion would be served by the establishment of a civil religion, centered on the existence of God.<sup>2</sup> He believed that it matters to the community that each citizen should have a religion; however, the subject of their beliefs concern the state only so far as they refer to morality and to the duties of this bond to others.

If Rousseau provided the term "civil religion" out of his concern for social cohesion, Alexis de Tocqueville empirically observed a form of civil religion that emerged precisely in the situation of church-state separation that Rousseau believed would undermine that cohesion. "In the United States, religion is mingled with all the habits of the nation and of the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force."<sup>3</sup>

Tocqueville saw that religious and political institutions were wholly distinct. Tocqueville is noted for his observation of the vigor of voluntary associations in the society; no less significant are his comments about the power of the "peculiar" religious force unchallenged behind the political philosophy.

Robert Bellah's article in 1967 gave words to what others had long felt:

While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of "the American Way of Life," few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-instituted civil religion in America...this religion—or perhaps better, this religious dimension—has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does.<sup>4</sup>

Bellah, writing between the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy and the 1968 killings of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.,<sup>5</sup> draws from the inaugural address of President

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1913), 121.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Vol. 1* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (Winter, 1967), 1.

<sup>5</sup> The 1960's and the subsequent 1970's, Vietnam and racial revolution were a time of great testing in this nation's identity as a viable society. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), describes it as a time of trial paralleling the Civil War. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American*

Kennedy.<sup>6</sup> Significant is the distinction, as Bellah saw it, between the specificity of the particularities of one's private religious belief and the character of the religious dimension relevant to public life. Bellah saw a "theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth."<sup>7</sup>

In 1973 he reiterated his premise, the sociological concept that all politically organized societies have some sort of civil religion. He did not think American civil religion was dying and called for three conditions for viability: 1) a searching of the entire tradition including the heretical byways, 2) that all be subject to a most searing criticism, and 3) that the search be opened to radically different traditions.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1975 *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah outlined more fully the historical evidence of American civil religion, clearly describing both the "chosen" character of America's myth of origin and the fact that the American dream from the beginning did not include the dreams of all, particularly African slaves and native Americans.<sup>9</sup>

A decade later, Bellah and colleagues, in *Habits of the Heart*, focused not on the civil religion, but still on the basic concept of the cohesiveness of American society. They saw the promise of America slipping away under the guise of separation and individualism, a culture that would finally "collapse of its own incoherence."<sup>10</sup> But Bellah, while acknowledging a certain poverty to America's situation, did not pursue his 1973 third principle of searching fully in radically different traditions, looking rather to recover the roots of traditional American civil religion.<sup>11</sup>

Sidney Mead's concept of the religion of the republic, preceding Bellah's 1967 article, was similarly "nonpejorative." He saw the American story as a place where religious rivals from Europe learned to practice religious freedom.<sup>12</sup> Mead stressed that the people of the United

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*People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1093 describes the catalytic power of the era a fundamental turning point.

<sup>6</sup> In early 1973, Bellah would analyze the Second Inaugural of Richard M. Nixon. See Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 259-272. Bellah notes the contradiction between Nixon's "I know America. I know the heart of America is good" and his subsequent corrupt use of power. Nixon's omission of divine judgment strikingly contrasts with Lincoln's Second Inaugural, even though Nixon ends with a fragile assertion that this nation is answerable to God.

<sup>7</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 5. Bellah concludes from a review of all the inaugural addresses that the God of civil religion is not specific, a "Christ," but rather unitarian, austere, more related to law and order than salvation and love, often referred to as "Great Author", "Providence," and "Protector" (7, 18).

<sup>8</sup> Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 257.

<sup>9</sup> Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 142.

<sup>10</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 281. See also John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979). Wilson questions just how individualistic we are, as modern people, even a vacation to the "wilderness" is not self-sufficient but dependent on many people and consumer products.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 275-306.

<sup>12</sup> Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 2. He does regret the "tragedy" of the Indian who had "no time" to adapt (p. 5). Mead writes during the early 1960's, corresponding to America's fascination with its new astronauts' early exploration of space, paralleling the excitement of America's earlier territorial exploration. See Charles H. Long, *Significantions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 144. Long notes Mead's poignancy – but deepens the problem, saying it is from concealment that the innocence and naiveté of the American emerges.

States, more than creating religious liberty among diverse people, stumbled onto it. Each wanted freedom for themselves; the only way to insure it was to grant it to others as well.<sup>13</sup>

G. K. Chesterton coined the phrase "a nation with the soul of a church" in response to the question, "What is America?" Mead's 1975 work by that name built on the concept that every nation is a spiritual entity. He renounced Winthrop Hudson's view that the United States was once Protestant and became pluralist,<sup>14</sup> agreeing with Martin Marty's assessment of an early nascent pluralism.<sup>15</sup>

Mead's religion of the republic was not to be equated with crass American nationalism.<sup>16</sup> The theologians of the religion of the republic would not be the priests of the separate sectarian traditions but the laity in leadership, such as Madison, Lincoln and Eisenhower. While generally hopeful, Mead did not want this religion of the republic to become idolatrous.

Writing earlier than Mead, and less optimistically, was Will Herberg, who in his landmark work, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, described the unacknowledged religion of the American way of life:

The fact that more than half the people openly admit that their religious beliefs have no effect on their ideas of politics and business would seem to indicate very strongly that, over and above conventional religion, there is to be found among Americans some sort of faith or belief or set of convictions, not generally designated as religion but definitely operative as such in their lives in the sense of providing them with some fundamental context of normativity and meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Herberg found this American religion pervasive and empty, and at the same time conformist, sentimental, individualistic and self-righteous. America was at the same time one of the most religious and most secular nations.

Similar in terminology, yet a contrasting concept, is Martin Marty's public church. It is an alternative to American civil religion which Marty denounced as at best a watered-down religion-in-general. He said that civil religion in its ideal form would be a religion for those who have no other faith or for "plural believers," but notes the term "civil religion" appears only in writings of theologians, sociologists and historians, not people at a local parish or American Legion Hall.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, he takes civil religion seriously.<sup>19</sup>

Marty says, "The intermingling of religion—understood as ultimate concern—and politics is inescapable." "We contend that America needs public religion, which has much to

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<sup>13</sup> Mead, *The Lively Experiment* 38. Of the two movements of the eighteenth century, rationalism and pietism, there was a gathering momentum to sweep in religious freedom and separation of church and state rather than traditional orthodoxy. "Only later did pietism discover its latent incompatibility with rationalism and marry again traditional orthodoxy."

<sup>14</sup> See Winthrop Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>15</sup> Martin Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 68.

<sup>16</sup> John F. Wilson, "A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion," in Russell Richey and Donald Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 118-119.

<sup>17</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 87.

<sup>18</sup> Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 181-182.

<sup>19</sup> Martin E. Marty, "Two Kinds of Civil Religion" in Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 144-145. Marty identified two styles of civil religion, priestly and prophetic, as well as two theological affirmations, "divine transcendence" and "national self-transcendence." The former understands the nation as under and responsible to God; in the latter the nation assumes transcendence. This stance was confirmed in a conversation I had with Marty while writing this paper: June 11, 2005, Des Moines, Iowa.

contribute to the common good. But what do we mean by public religion?<sup>20</sup> Lauding the fact that America has become more pluralistic in its third century, he calls for the repositories of private faith in the consciousness and practice of millions of Americans to become “public” in its implications and influence on public, common life, and this is an invitation to all religious people, not just whoever is dominant at the time.

Catherine Albanese in her *America: Religions and Religion* was aware of the danger of telling the story of the civil religion from only the dominant denominational viewpoint. She would seem to take Bellah's third goal seriously. "To face up to the implications of pluralism means to recognize that it is problematic to recite, even if artfully and inclusively, one story before exploring the realities of the many stories."<sup>21</sup>

Albanese's main concern is with how the many encounter each other, ambivalence ranging from fearful hostility to conversion attempts, to struggling openness, and even fascination. Some have made alliances; others have been forced to assimilate. The public face of American religion has begun to look different in the strong and compelling presence of the many “others.”<sup>22</sup> Diana Eck clearly shows the religious diversity of this nation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in *A New Religious America*. She retains the “from many one” theme but writes that pluralism has “widened the sense of ‘we.’”<sup>23</sup> No longer can one legitimately speak only of Christian America, as she writes of “American Buddhists” and “American Muslims,” and more.

Albanese's concern that the dominant have excluded the many is intensified in Charles Long's critique of the civil religion. “American” often meant Christian European immigrants, which overlooks Native Americans and African Americans. Consciously or unconsciously it served to “enhance, justify and render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land.”<sup>24</sup> An important distinction he saw is that Christianity as a revealed religion “offers salvation to all human beings regardless of circumstance, whereas in civil religion salvation is seen within the context of belonging to the American national community.”<sup>25</sup>

He would press Albanese's point further in asking methodologically how to understand and deal with invisibility. African American people were not invisible to one another, but their history was ignored.<sup>26</sup> One cannot simply “add” them because that doesn't take into account the relationship of the invisible ones in the historically developing civil religion. This invisibility was within the consciousness of white Americans. The concealment of the reality of “others” has shaped the story.

Vincent Harding, himself an African American theologian, ironically holds hope for the civil faith, claiming it on behalf of blacks and other oppressed peoples, believing that through their struggles the entire nation will benefit.

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<sup>20</sup> Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion and the Common Good*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 11, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981), xix. Albanese proceeds with her history beginning with the “manyness” of the Native American tribes.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 345-373.

<sup>23</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America*. (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 65.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Long, “Civil Rights—Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion,” in Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Long, “A New Look at American Religion,” *Anglican Theological Review Supplementary Series No.1*, (July, 1973): 122. Long emphasizes that black churches being the locus of the civil rights struggle was not incidental, “for the civil rights battle represented the black confrontation with an American myth that dehumanized his being” (122).

We are now scattered over the length and breadth of the society more fully than ever before. We are wedged into its inner cities, sprawling into their outskirts. We are entrenched in many parts of the public sector of the political, economic and cultural life. Nowhere can we ever be invisible again...We must finally ask ourselves what kind of human society we want here, in America...We must ask ourselves—not once, but continuously—how much we are prepared to pay for the creation of a new society in America.<sup>27</sup>

While many would like to delude themselves into thinking that the “race problem” has been solved in so far as many African Americans have achieved economic and social “success” in America, racism remains, made more complex by dominant Americans inability to acknowledge it. A sad reminder is in the burning of black churches, particularly the rash of fires in the mid 1990’s

Whites, included in the ecclesiology of the civil religion, failed to recognize the significance of the black church for those excluded. Whites tended to believe there was nothing racial about the fires. While one might see few daily signs of racial animosity, the attack on African-American churches was seen [by African-Americans] as an attack on the heart of the black community, its political, social, educational and spiritual center.<sup>28</sup>

The inclusion of Native American religion is complex. About 550 different Indian societies and distinct languages have been identified in North America.<sup>29</sup> While these nations had the challenge of dealing with one another, their problems were compounded in the ambiguity of their identity in Columbus' "discovery."<sup>30</sup> In one view of the strangers encountered in the West Indies, Columbus writes:

The people of this island...all go naked, men and women...they are so guileless and so generous with all they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. They never refuse anything which they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite anyone to share it, and display so much love as if they would give their hearts.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Vincent Harding, *The Other American Revolution* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California; and Atlanta: Institute of Black World, 1980), 204, 205, 210. In an unpublished paper, “So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Second Coming of America” based on a lecture presented at the University of Mississippi, October 3, 1978, Harding looks for a “second coming of America” since the old has been “cracked, wedged open, and cannot be the same again.” Blacks cannot make a separate peace with America because their needs are the needs of millions of Americans. What is needed is revolutionary transformation for an America with justice, compassion and humanity. “I dare to believe we can make America a new society for all” (56-60).

<sup>28</sup> Norma Cook Everist, “The Burning of Black Churches,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24 (August, 1997), 337-338.

<sup>29</sup> Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> See Edmundo O’Gorman’s work in Long, *Significations*, 87-88. O’Gorman seeks to dispel the notion that Columbus “discovered” America, reasoning the exploration, conquest and colonization of America was based on a European concept which was absurd; as though America was a ready-made thing waiting to be unveiled to an awe-struck world. He argues Amerigo Vespucci in 1501-1502 discerned he had found a “new world” which opened the possibility of explaining the “other” in its own terms in a way contradictory to the accepted picture of the world.

<sup>31</sup> Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 6-7.

Such innocence placed the Indian in the paradisiacal imagery of the land these Europeans wanted to own. But if, in the American religious dream of the Promised Land, the land was to be conquered, the people already here became invisible, part of the now foreboding landscape. Unlike the paradisiacal view, it dwelt on scorching deserts and uncrossable mountains, hurricanes and floods, tropical heat and arctic cold. In accordance with this violent and extreme landscape, the second view found the native inhabitants anything but innocent. Instead they were depicted as "horrid savages" devoted to murder, rape, human sacrifice, and cannibalism ...spending the time left over from murder, plunder, and rape in the barbaric worship of a vast array of demons—chief of whom was the devil himself. It is clear which image prevailed in the pursuit of extermination of the Native American which ensued. They, so long excluded from the ecclesiology of ACR, existed only in the mythic "wild west" stories of white film writers. Notable is the fact that only in 2004 did the National Museum of the American Indian open on the National Mall in Washington D.C.<sup>32</sup>

In the development of the United States, biblical imagery was used profusely, particularly during two moments of crisis, the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. The epic of the deliverance of the children of Israel<sup>33</sup> used to justify the Revolutionary War was lost in relationship to the slave issue, except by the oppressed themselves. Estranged in their servitude, as they were exposed to the Christian Bible, there was no part with which they were so familiar as the deliverance from Egypt, but Egypt to them was the nation's institution of slavery.

Fortified by such texts, blacks had no trouble setting aside white beliefs about the recapitulation of Israelite history in North America. God's chosen people did not constitute a nation among nations, but those who suffered unjustly among all peoples. The story of Israel was not a prototype of God's gracious call of a modern nation but of all who would hunger and thirst after righteousness.<sup>34</sup>

The civil religious creed of freedom for blacks resulted in the black church freedom movement, in Black Nationalism, and in renewal movements to call the nation to act on its own civil creeds.<sup>35</sup> The issue of slavery became a crisis in the civil religion. Some had seen the sin of slavery as a flaw in American Civil Religion, but for many the crisis in the Union was a religious event because the sin had grown so large it endangered the sacred nation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> National Museum of the American Indian, Fourth and Independence Ave. S.W., Washington D.C.  
www.nmai.si.edu

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Harding, *There Is a River* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 7-8. Harding notes that Africans became the "chosen people" ... for American slavery.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 550-551.

<sup>35</sup> See Vincent Harding, *The Other American Revolution*; Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1972); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken, 1974); and C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). Lincoln deals with the tragic saga of the Blacks and Jews, both estranged and divided against one another in the "so-called Black-Jewish confrontation" (174-188).

<sup>36</sup> White leaders on both sides spoke of God's will. John Lord, D.D., in a sermon preached Thanksgiving Day, 1851 in the Presbyterian Church, Buffalo New York, "The Higher Law in its Application to the Fugitive Slave Bill: A Sermon on the Duties Men Owe to God and to Governments," said one should not expose a whole community to destruction under the plea of delivering one of its members from servitude. "This covenant people needs desperately to find a peaceful settlement so that the ship of state long tossed by tempests and threatened with destruction by conflicting and angry elements is at last sailing on a calm sea with law-abiding crew and the flag of the Union nailed

A significant creed of this nation's faith is openness to the poor who seek refuge here, but each wave of newcomers was met with fear. Yet still they came, in the thousands in the nineteenth century. It is no surprise that "illegal immigration" is a major question in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although Roman Catholics had a longer history in the Americas than any other Christian group, civil religion had a distinctly Protestant tone. The myth of "chosen people" was an Old Testament image and the roots of American Civil Religion are often described as Judeo-Christian, but anti-Semitism continues. Although the U.S. after 9/11 had the opportunity/necessity to learn about Islam, that opportunity quickly eroded, being replaced by a fear-infested, self-interest stance of "war against terrorism." A just, peaceful full inclusion of those of many religions remains elusive as long as the "chosen people" image is only Christian.

On the West Coast, immigrants, though coming in great number, were never considered part of the myth in the same way, particularly because they came across a different ocean than the Biblical Red Sea the Atlantic had represented. Because they were alien in looks and religion, they would remain strangers a longer time, their ancestry more noticed than their American Citizenship.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Public School and American Civil Religion**

The American public schools served the civil religious function of social integration and promotion of a common American identity.<sup>38</sup> Sidney Mead wrote of the necessity of the school to provide the foundation of shared beliefs out of which would come a unified people.<sup>39</sup>

In 1647 in the General Court of Massachusetts the following order was given:  
That learning may not be buried in the graves of our fathers in the Church and Commonwealth, it is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall report to him to write and read.<sup>40</sup>

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to the masts." On the other side, the Rev. Justin Perkins in his sermon "Our Country's Sin," preached July 3, 1851, deplored the sin of slavery, saying the country was in imminent peril because heaven would judge this nation which was the "fairest and highest hope of a suffering world." The place where Perkins delivered the sermon is not stated. Both original sermons are in the Library of the Divinity School of Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>37</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 191. Measures were taken to limit accessibility and assimilation, such as the 1913 and 1920 Anti-Alien Land Laws, the 1922 Supreme Court decision that Japanese immigrants were prohibited from becoming naturalized, and the 1924 Oriental Exclusion Act. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was a travesty of justice for which an apology was decades delayed.

<sup>38</sup> Gail Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment* (Storrs, CT: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1979), 45. The relationship of civil religion and the public school is significant and variously described. Bellah and Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*, 75-76. "No doubt public education...primarily transmits the civil religion however imperfectly. Civil religion is both parent and child to the public school." See also Boardman Kathan, "Patriotism, Piety and Pedagogy: Confronting Civil Religion," *Religion Teacher's Journal* (November-December, 1975), 18. "It is more accurate to see civil religion as the established faith and the schools as the apostolate for communicating it."

<sup>39</sup> Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 68. Mead wrote that in this sense the public school system of the United States is its established church, reinforcing the religion of many Americans as "democracy." Rousseau was convinced that the true political community could be based on the virtue of its citizens and their ardent love of country. "Public education had to implant these feelings in the hearts of all children." Stephen R. Graubard, Preface to "America's Schools: Public and Private," *Daedalus* 110 (Summer, 1981), vi.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in F.V.N. Painter, *Lutheran Education*, 1889 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 71-72.



The ideology of these early schools was Protestant, "giving prominence to values and habits that sustained the 'chosen' people in their beliefs."<sup>41</sup> Horace Mann, as secretary of the newly formed State Board of Education in Massachusetts, fought to exclude anything distinctively sectarian, but in doing so consciously and unconsciously promoted his own kind of "common denominator" Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the most influential man in public education, who succeeded in giving one-half the school children in the United States from 1836 to 1900 the same readers, was McGuffey.<sup>43</sup> Although history and geography lessons taught facts, they also imparted a feeling of nationalism. A lesson of 1850 read: "There are now more than 3,000,000 people in the United States and this country is the first, most enlightened, and powerful government on earth."<sup>44</sup>

The melting pot was generally evangelical Protestant in religion and bourgeois in economic outlook:

Trying to speak for all Americans, they yet wore the blinders of their class, religion and ethnic background...theocentric, they wanted to assimilate foreigners to their own version of America...they praised the United States as a land of economic opportunity and justice and tended to blame the poor for their plight.<sup>45</sup>

John Dewey epitomized the desire to Americanize and homogenize through "modern" educational philosophy and methodology. He was committed to democracy as a basis for education. Dewey believed that particular religious faiths would impede the development of the nation. "Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation."<sup>46</sup>

A "creed" founded on common education, according to Dewey, would change and grow but could not be shaken. "Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of humankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant."<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps more than any other agency, the common, or "public" schools functioned as a melting pot, attempting to deal with diversity by creating an educated, united people, proud of

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen R. Graubard, *Daedalus* 110, vi-vii. Noah Webster, premier wordsmith of the new nation, organized schooling around the reading of his distinctly American translation of the Bible. See Hatch and Noll, *The Bible in America*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> For Mann, irreligion or infidelity was deplored and Christianity was as broad as creation. See McCluskey, *Public Schools and Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

<sup>43</sup> Mark Sullivan, *Our Times Vol. II: America Finding, Herself* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 22. The common schools were founded and maintained on the principle that each person should have some learning and that the nation should be literate. The moral admonitions were connected with education itself: "If I love to read, I will be wise and good." *McGuffey's New Fifth Eclectic Reader* (Cincinnati, 1857), 47 in Richard D. Moser, *Making the American Mind, Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers* (New York: King's Crown Press, Columbia University, 1946), 22.

<sup>44</sup> James Cruickshank, *The Primary Geography*, c. 1867, in Sullivan, *Our Times Vol. II*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot, "Conflict and Consensus in American Public Education" in *Daedalus* 110 (Summer, 1981), 6.

<sup>46</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 26. Dewey believed that a local common life was needed so that the public could find and identify itself. See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems 1927* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1954).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

being Americans, and skilled in handling the responsibilities of a democracy. Children were able to enter from diverse economic backgrounds, receive a common education, and leave with a more equal opportunity. In the decades of the 1960-1980s, the melting pot concept began to be challenged. Equal opportunity and an educated citizenry are important, but the rich diversity of this nation's peoples need not be erased.

Polarization developed in the nation and within and among denominations on such issues as civil religion, Vietnam, The Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, school bussing, and school prayer. A conservative movement began to direct political approaches and attempted to redefine the public religion in their faith terms. Recent church growth has not been within mainline liberal churches, so long associated with the civil religion, but with the fundamentalist and evangelical churches and with a wide range of churches independent of denominations. The nation is bitterly divided as to whether the freedom of the United States depends upon its being a "Christian nation." That division has grown to dominate, if not determine, political elections.

In regard to the public school, the institution to inculcate the civil faith, the right to educate one's children at home, distinctly within the private sector, is greatly debated. Some "private" schools prefer to call themselves independent schools, asserting that they have "publics," boards of trustees, etc., to which they are accountable, even if that is not the government. But many feel this is not "public" in the sense of inclusion of all and that the state board of education should certify and evaluate all schools, even, and perhaps especially, schools in private homes.

"School choice" has become a huge subject. The very word "choice" resonates with ACR's holy creed of "freedom." In reality it is much more complex and, as Hubert Morken and Jo Renee Formicola say, "very political." In exploring the laws they also have examined a multitude of religious and entrepreneurial strategies, concluding that at this point in history the issue is complex and at one and the same time, "too conservative, too liberal, too black, too Evangelical, too Catholic, too monetary, too new, too loose, too entrepreneurial, too naïve, too political, too free-market"..... to fully understand. It is a critical political phenomenon and issue that will not soon go away.<sup>48</sup>

In a common society, one does not have a responsibility only for educating one's own children, but for all children in the society to receive an education, similar to the commitments of the early inhabitants of Massachusetts. Likewise a nation as economically wealthy as the United States has an obligation not simply to educate its own citizenry so they can be economically competitive, but to care about and help provide for education for all people in the world.<sup>49</sup>

The phenomenon of the public school is symbolic of the question of safe boundaries in the larger society.<sup>50</sup> At the time of the country's bicentennial, the public school auditorium was the site of community historical pageants, while there were bus boycotts in the parking lot. The bussing issue, begun in the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, accentuates the dilemma of diversity and the concept of neighborhood in a pluralistic society. Adults delay

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<sup>48</sup> Hubert Morken and Jo Renee Formicola, *The Politics of School Choice* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 13.

<sup>49</sup> This paper focuses on ACR and education in the United States. Each country has its own system of education. Comments in this paper are not intended to critique positively or negatively those various systems or the relationship of church and state, public and private in other nations.

<sup>50</sup> Focusing on the public school does not imply it is or should be the only public space to be together in our diversity. The very lack of other viable public meeting places has intensified the pressure on the public schools to solve the society's problem of differences.

dealing with the dilemma of diversity in public space. The propensity to project the problems on the public meeting place of children is manifest in the additional issue of Bible reading and prayer, book banning, sex education, the teaching of creationism (“intelligent design”), shared time, federal and local aid for transportation and school lunches for private education, English as a second language, vouchers, and the disparity among school districts on funds spent for educating children. The current administration’s “No child left behind” act, while seemingly benevolent, has burdened many schools. The long cherished public school, while on the verge of fulfilling its potential for dealing with diversity, is still a battleground for opposing forces.<sup>51</sup>

The “battle ground” imagery is not merely metaphor. Violence in public schools is pervasive, a barometer of the United States’ fascination with guns. What is it about the history and creeds of ACR that might contribute to such a situation? “From its beginning this nation has been challenged to deal with its diversity and with its violence.”<sup>52</sup>

An evangelical who is a public school principal separates himself from fundamentalists in saying that in their call for reforms some do not want public schools, but rather Christian schools for the public. In recent years there has been a concerted effort on the part of people and groups holding such a view to “take over” local schools’ boards.

This raises once again the question of teaching religion in public schools. McGuffey’s era is gone, but the remnants of the presumption of ACR being the “glue that holds together” morals and values in the public schools remains. However, while many schools’ boards across the land are trying to reinstate a certain type of evangelical Christian teaching into the schools, many others have adopted a more appropriate stance that students need to encounter the beliefs and practices of all major world religions. The public schools continue to be an important arena for dynamic human conversation and learning, and not just for children. (Community colleges, for example are vital, local, publicly funded educational institutions for hundreds of thousands of people of all ages.) Through effective teaching, citizens will be prepared for understanding the peoples of the world and their religions, a vital component of peace and justice.

An example of how a local community school board is dealing with religion in the public school is summarized:

1. The school may sponsor the *study* of religion, but may not sponsor the *practice* of religion.
2. The school may *expose* students to all religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
3. The school’s approach to religion is one of *instruction* not of *indoctrination*.
4. The function of the school is to *educate* about all religions, not to *convert* anyone to religion or any specific religion.
5. The school’s approach to religion is *academic* not *devotional*.
6. The school should *study* what people believe, but should not *teach* students what they should believe.
7. The school should strive for student *awareness* of all religions, but should not press for students’ *acceptance* of any one religion.
8. The school should seek to *inform* the student about various beliefs but should not seek to *conform* them to any one belief.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 337. See Chapter 9, “Parish Education in a Pluralistic World.”

<sup>53</sup> From a pamphlet, “Charting a Course Together” published by Dubuque Community Schools, Dubuque, Iowa, 1994.

The question remains whether Americans will achieve freedom from pluralism through separate spaces or freedom for pluralism through public places to be safely different together. For all their faults, the public schools "are probably the most responsive public institutions we have...and only a goal suited to our time and place can serve again to create a sense of public good."<sup>54</sup>

### **Components of American Civil Religion**

Those raised within the culture of the United States of America experience the formative influence of American Civil Religion. That fact is not a judgment, but a description of the "other religion" that shapes people's beliefs and actions, whether they know it or not. Because ACR is a living religion, the era in which one was raised and educated makes a difference. For example the ACR of the depression era or W.W. II is different from that of the 1960's, 1990's, or this new millennium. It continues to change, almost daily. Whereas ACR uses Biblical references, as time goes by, the belief systems of ACR also change—some would say, "enhance," but others say "distort"—the biblical references.

Once in place, America's dependence upon its own myth<sup>55</sup> and symbols would become self-perpetuating. In such a process there is a propensity towards error and misjudgment, a possibility for an inadequate ecclesiology and an inappropriate creed:

If a myth serves as a model of reality by interpreting experience and grounding it; in a broader and deeper context, it also serves as a model for reality. That is, a convincing myth aggressively makes a claim upon the hearer. It becomes a model for shaping its future life. The American myth operates in many explicit and implicit ways—schools, mass media, literature, music, dress—to lay claim upon the lives of Americans. It calls people to conform to its shape.<sup>56</sup>

Central to the creed of American Civil Religion is the chosenness and righteousness of this new people and their emerging nation. Sin is significantly missing, (therefore it is not among the 12 components listed below) and so is repentance. Although repentance is absent, renewal and rebirth are very prevalent.

America was not so much in need of a Redeemer, as to be a Redeemer nation to the world. Although Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural speaks directly to American slavery as an offense against God's righteous judgments, redemption was more of an action in the white soul and emancipation in retrospect was more self-congratulation than repentance.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Graubard, *Daedalus* 101, viii.

<sup>55</sup> Intermingled with and supporting the civil religion were the Scriptures, but just as the story of the nation itself replaced that narrative, the Scriptures, continuing in the particularities of the private sphere, were replaced publicly except for some imagery, by the documents of the new nation. They became its holy writ. In the 1970's, when under trial during the Watergate hearings, the nation seemed held together only by the belief in these sacred writings.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Benne and Phillip Hefner, *Defining America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 7.

<sup>57</sup> Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 55. "For fifty years after the Civil War [the] picture was more self-congratulatory than it had ever been before, its self-satisfaction reinforced by the image of Lincoln freeing the slaves, a gesture magnanimously shared with black Americans by the practice of naming public schools in black ghettos after the Great Emancipator."

In the educational task, et. examining American civil religion, the point is not to persuade people of the formative religious influence, but help them be aware of it. Therefore a presentation method might have quite negative results, leading people to assume the teacher was promoting (or negating) a particular political viewpoint. In order to help people gain awareness of the formative affect of ACR and of people's participation in it, I take the following twelve components and utilize a discovery method. That method is congruent with the premise that people do participate in this ACR.

For over twenty years I have spent one session in the basic required Educational Ministry class at Wartburg Theological Seminary (Dubuque, Iowa, USA) using this method. I have also used this method with adult education groups in congregations. I first give a brief history of ACR. Then these twelve categories are placed around the room. After giving a sample or two to get them started, the entire class is invited to move around the room adding to the lists. No matter what their particular political stance, people vigorously engage, and because anyone can place any phrase on the list, it becomes a collaborative, non-judgmental, discovering process. We then look at and comment on what "surrounds" us, before moving on to a second stage: exegeting a creed of ACR and a corresponding creed of Christian doctrine.

For the purpose of this paper, I list a few samples for each component, inviting the readers/participants at REA 2005 in Toronto to carry the discovery process further. Because I was writing this section of this paper late June-early July 2005, I used current news events and feature stories as they unfolded in the U.S. media as examples, (I did not plan what I would include beforehand). Readers/participants will want to include examples from their own contexts at the time of their reading this paper.<sup>58</sup> The lists include formal and informal items, all of which play significant educational roles in formation of worldview. Simply making and looking at the lists poses intriguing, and troubling awareness of the formative power of ACR.

### Holy Days

Some are: The Fourth of July<sup>59</sup>, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Super Bowl Sunday, September 11. Some holy days have two different meanings, e.g. Christmas, Easter (bunnies or crosses) What others are there?

*Sample from the News:* "Sabbath" – C.B.S. Sunday Morning and *Life Magazine* "Great American Weekend Study" carried features on the "overscheduled weekend."<sup>60</sup> People are stressed out trying to complete lists of things to accomplish: soccer games for kids, chores, errands, 9-10 hours of work brought home. "Sabbath" was referenced in the news feature as "a time for quiet and reflection," but there was no mention of public worship, or religious education, or even God. I found it ironic that the ACR creed of "self-fulfillment" was the center of this "Sabbath" understanding rather than God being at center (the traditional religious understanding of Sabbath). The goal of recovering such a Sabbath was to find "down time," and

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<sup>58</sup> As noted earlier, I am very aware that using only U.S. news and events would seem to further the presumptive stance of ACR. Therefore, I invite readers to either reflect on this exercise in the context of their own nation, or—because news events in the United States are broadcast all over the world—to comment on such news events in view of American civil religion from the readers' perspective. Either would make for interesting conversation in Toronto.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 3-5. "Unlike most historic peoples, America as a nation began on a definite date, July Fourth, 1776. Thus, in analyzing America's myth of origin, close attention must be paid to the mythic significance of the Declaration of Independence, which is considerable" (3).

<sup>60</sup> CBS Sunday Morning June 19, 2005, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050521> .

to restore the “bedrock of faith in the American family” (a creed of ACR), not religious observance or faith education.

### Shrines

School children make pilgrimages to the monuments in Washington D.C. Families also make pilgrimages to Disneyland and Disneyworld which promise fun in fantasy land, and a very controlled atmosphere. They are “public” only if one has the expensive ticket to enter. In addition to these large shrines, self-fulfillment guides recommend gathering favorite items from special life moments and making a home shrine to spend meditative time to relieve stress.

There are more common, everyday architectural sacred spaces, such as the shopping malls which spread across America. There people engage in the appointed mission of being a consumer. Seemingly open to the public, they are private spaces for acquiring private possessions in the “American domestic religion.”<sup>61</sup> Some are humble, even a bit run-down, others elegant gallerias. Some even have stained glass vaulted ceilings in the center, while others promise leisure through living-room like lounge chairs.<sup>62</sup> All call the community to “spend” time in pursuit of the ultimate “meaningful” things of life.

### Holy Writ

The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and particularly, the Bill of Rights, and (more informally) *The Readers Digest*, the internet (unfiltered access to information) *Sample from the News*: The former executive director of *Readers Digest*, William Schulz, was recently made Commissioner for Public Broadcasting ombudsman, he and the new chair made clear their intent to restrain PBS because of what they consider “leftist” viewpoints. Citizens contacted congressional representatives late June 2005 to try to restore budget cuts to PBS. This battle raises significant issues about what is public, and funding for public television in children’s commercial-free programming.

### Hymns

“The Star Spangled Banner” is the national anthem of the United States. Since 9/11, however, “God Bless America” has become the more popular “hymn.” Whereas in the national anthem the courage and fortitude of the nation under fire is celebrated through the image of “the flag was still there,” “God Bless America” is now sung with a type of religious confidence (defiance?) that it is *God* who blesses *America* (over-against all others?). Using an ACR ritual of “baseball,” one notes that in recent seasons, the national anthem is sung at the beginning of the game and “God Bless America” at the 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch.<sup>63</sup>

A third ACR hymn, more folksy, has arisen, “God Bless the U.S.A.” by Lee Greenwood. It is set in the first person of a working class male, (“If...I had to start again with just my children and my wife.”) with a hint of anti-education (“cause there ain’t no doubt I love this land”). The pledge is to stand up and fight to defend the nation (“her”) against nebulous enemies

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<sup>61</sup> See Jon Pahl, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> See “All Kinds of Steeples” and “Centers of Meaning” in Norma Cook Everist, *Open the Doors and See all the People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>63</sup> See Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II, *The Faith of Fifty Mission: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). This fascinating book traces the search for the American Dream, describing “saints and sinners” in its description of baseball and American religion and the “theological quest” for a national religion.

(“cause the flag still stands for freedom and they can’t take that away”) with the symbols of “flag” and the word, “freedom.” What are other hymns?

### Symbols

The very words, “freedom” and “democracy” have become ACR symbols which can be used to raise patriotic emotions regardless of the context or content of actions taken under their banner. The American flag is the central liturgical symbol.<sup>64</sup> Recently, pictures of the Twin Towers are seen in hallowed places in the homes of people across the country. “Yellow” is the liturgical color for grief. Red, white and blue are the omni-present liturgical colors for every season; since 9/11, these colors are combined with Christmas decorations.

But there are other symbols, such as the word “Columbine” to stand for the proliferation of public school shootings, and commercial ones, such as the golden arches of McDonalds.

*Sample from the News:* The placement of religious symbols in public property is a current controversial issue. The U.S. Supreme Court handed down a split decision on June 27. In essence, the passing of one and defeat of the other rulings (both 5-4) ensure, not a clear directive, but that future rulings will be decided one by one. The reasoning centered on how and when the Ten Commandments were put there in the first place: a monument among many other monuments that show in the influence of religion(s) in America’s legal development, or as an expression of a specific religion. The debate puts before the public the questions of relation of church and state, the nation’s “neutrality” or “hostility” towards “religion.” A commentator on public television on June 28 mentioned briefly the role of civil religion in the “American experience,” but did not elaborate.

### Saints and Martyrs

The saints are not leaders of various faith traditions, (the disestablishment clause) but laity. “Democracy” does produce a certain priesthood of all believers. One could count Billy Graham, not primarily associated with a specific church body. He appeared on news interviews June 2005 at the time beginning what might be his last crusade. He is described not by his beliefs, or institutional ecclesial leadership, but by number of presidents he has advised. Who are other saints of ACR?

U.S. Presidents, though not royalty, are spokespeople for ACR; the tracing of ACR beliefs is often done through the analysis of inaugural addresses. So it is not surprising the central martyrs of ACR are assassinated presidents, particularly Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. But in the same category is Elvis Presley—who many think is still alive in some spiritual sense.

*Sample from the news:* Pope John Paul’s “rise to sainthood.” Although ACR historically contained significant anti-papal elements, the news of the death of and the choosing of a new pope was central to “religious” awareness of American people.

The exclusion of African Americans from the ecclesiology of ACR and the lack of a creed of repentance makes significant the June 2005 news reporting of Klansman (and preacher) Edgar Ray Killen, in his eighties, being found guilty of manslaughter in the 1964 deaths of civil

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<sup>64</sup> In the news during June 2005 were stories of groups of citizens and some legislators once again promoting a bill to make desecration of the American flag a felony.

rights workers (martyrs) James Chaney, (21) Andrew Goodman, (20) and Michael Schwerner (24). If “guilt” and “repentance” are absent from ACR, justice delayed would be a symptom.<sup>65</sup>

During the summer of 2005, President George Bush, so long hesitant to mention the number of U.S. casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, used the numbers to shore up support for the war, making the circuitous argument that the war needed to continue so that these martyrs (“heroes”) would not have died in vain. Likewise, his speeches abundantly insert the symbol “September 11” to justify administration policies.<sup>66</sup>

*Other samples:* One could reflect on the extended coverage of “blond (white), honor student” Natalee Holloway, “missing in paradise” in Aruba (note the “exotic,” reference to the Caribbean island about which citizens of the United States are unknowing in their ACR vision of the world).<sup>67</sup>

### Priests

And who are the priests of ACR? Who are those who lead the rituals, offer prayers, and celebrate the sacraments? Who leads the people in their prayers of penitence? (One could ask: What are the sacraments of ACR?) And who proclaims the Word of God? Which gods do we worship? Who are the leaders in the American mission? Condoleezza Rice, national security advisor to President George W. Bush?

*Sample from the News:* C.B.S. Evening News is trying out a variety of ways to fulfill the “priestly role” of interpreting the “truth” since Dan Rather’s controversial departure earlier this spring.<sup>68</sup> Some “priests” are more venerable and trusted than others. Significantly, at the time of Rather’s leaving, news stories were not so much about Rather, as about Walter Cronkite (although his retirement preceded Rather becoming anchor years earlier) whose signature “That’s the way it is” newscast ending grounded people each evening in the “truth” of what had happened each day.<sup>69</sup> With the death of Johnny Carson this spring, viewers were told that during their era, Walter Cronkite told people “the way it is” and Johnny Carson, “tucked people in at bedtime.”

### Prophets

Prophets arise to call this “religious people” back to its original task, its “errand in the wilderness.”<sup>70</sup> Who are the prophets today? “Whistle blowers” exposing corporate fraud? Leaders of minority groups, excluded from the ecclesiology of ACR? Spokespeople for new immigrants? Are they the late night television talk show comedians, such as Jon Stewart of the “Daily Show?” (Such shows are the main source of news of many young people. Does that make the comedians prophets, priests, or simply comedians?) Are there significant prophets today? Might religious educators from many faith communities play such a role?

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<sup>65</sup> Another example of injustice would be the decades delayed public “apology” to Japanese Americans who suffered in internment campus in the United States during World War II.

<sup>66</sup> For example, Bush’s address to the nation June 28, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> See a film by Stephanie Black, *Life and Debt*, a New Yorker Film release, a DVD which vividly shows the discrepancy between tourists’ view of Jamaica and the real situation in Jamaica since economic globalization.

<sup>68</sup> C.B.S. is at the time of this writing using a team approach under the leadership of veteran Bob Schieffer, whose lack of name recognition is not solved by their website which doesn’t promote him personally.

<sup>69</sup> Newscasts show Cronkite’s announcement to the nation of President Kennedy’s death again and again through the years.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 2.



During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and 1970's, religious leaders played significant prophetic roles, most notable, of course, Martin Luther King Jr. His "I Have a Dream" speech resonated with the "American Dream" a central creed of ACR. He took a prophet stance to call America to its dream and to make it a more inclusive one. As noted earlier, during the American Civil War, religious leaders of both sides spoke of God's will. Who are the prophets concerning the present war in Iraq?

Note that prophetic voices speak from the outside or the "underside," particularly calling a people to justice. Is this not significantly different from those religious leaders today who call for their particularly Christian interpretation of ACR to be the official religion of the nation and its schools?

### Rituals

Not unlike ancient Greeks and Romans, the "arena" is a central gathering place. "As American as baseball and apple pie" is ACR folklore. In recent decades, football, a contact sport with its emphases on brute strength has overtaken baseball in popularity (hence the Holy Day of Super Bowl Sunday). In very recent years, NASCAR is now being nationally broadcast, corresponding in part to the rise of the religious right, ideology. Every four years, the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies provide a global ritual, however United States is usually most focused on metals they can win.<sup>71</sup>

*Sample from Personal Experience:* During the weeks in late June and early July I was allowing all events and experiences to become part of the "research" of this part of the paper. While attending a conference in the Rocky Mountains, I decided to attend a July 4 fireworks display to be held at Coors (baseball) Field in Denver. I watched outside as hundreds of people gathered, not necessarily to see the game, but for fireworks after. The vast majority was young people in their 20's, less interested in the tradition "as American as baseball...and" as the fireworks, and, of course, stepping outside to attract and be attractive, waiting on the roofs of bars, filling the streets. The show itself was delayed (the game went to the bottom of the 11th), but people *waited* for the liturgical celebration of lights in the sky.

### Gods

So, then, who or what are the gods of ACR? Money? Material possessions? People? The American dream itself? Perhaps the nation itself? For a "people" to make themselves into a "chosen people" certainly makes them the preferred children of a God, with the temptation to the idolatry of making others over into their own image.

One answer to the question of, "In whom do we believe?" I read in the May/June issue of the satiric magazine, *Wittenburg Door*:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, who gave the world to me and other Americans along with the authority to possess and exploit it in order to increase our wealth and comfort, regardless of how we may destroy the earth or cheat others out of its benefits.

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<sup>71</sup> One must note that during this writing, the announcement of London acquiring the 2012 Olympics came one day before four bombs on undergrounds and a bus killed and wounded many people there July 7, 2005. The timing which corresponded with the G8 conference meeting in Great Britain raises the global challenge of working together for peace and justice.

I believe in Jesus Christ who was born of a Virgin on Christmas Day in order to become the Reason for the Season. He was a really nice guy—strong, white, and gentle—and was the friend of sinners like me because he knew no one is perfect. He was crucified by Jews and other non-Christians but rose from the dead on Easter so that we can always have a spring-like hope. He went to heaven where He reigns with God in order to guarantee my rights. He will come again to pass judgment against those who are different from me and to condemn them to eternal damnation

I believe in keeping a pleasant Spirit toward men who agree with me, that going to church is an admirable practice, that there are good people around the world who support the American way, and that I, my family, and those like us will, together, enjoy life everlasting, which we richly deserve.<sup>72</sup>

Now, of course, belief in this God is not taught. Or is it?

The seriousness of the issue of the idolatry, not simply of “money,” but of unjust economic globalization cannot be underestimated.

This false ideology is grounded on the assumption that the market, built on private property, unrestrained competition and the centrality of contracts, is the absolute law governing human life, society, and the natural environment. This is idolatry and leads to the systematic exclusion of those who own no property, the destruction of cultural diversity, the dismantling of fragile democracies and the destruction of the earth.<sup>73</sup>

### Creeds

Popular creeds of ACR are often printed as bumper stickers (or the newer magnetic ribbons) on cars or as internet quips. “You deserve a break today.” “Shop ‘til you Drop.” “Win! Stand out in a crowd!” (In contrast to the Australian mandate not to be a “tall poppy.”) Does the creed of contemporary popular ACR include a self worth of deserving to not have “bad things happen to us?” What does belief in “family values” mean? My family? Or yours, too?

*Sample from news feature:* “Like religion, science embraces our pain and fears, and assures us that things can be better,” writes Geoffrey Cowley in “The Future of Medicine.”<sup>74</sup> The belief systems of American Civil Religion also shape the creeds, or at least the perceptions of the creeds, of particular faith communities. For example, the Christian creeds do not “assure us that things can be better.” On the contrary, aware of the human condition, Christians know that sin will continue, in more and more sophisticated and subtle ways. But the Americanization of Christianity has led Cowley to the belief in the creed that “things can be better and better.”

*Sample of belief in the creed of the American Dream:* C.B.S. “Sunday Morning,” June 19, 2005, ran a feature on Americans who are purchasing beach front land in Mexico, (“San Diego South” they called it) where they can “afford to live like Americans,” which they say they can no longer do in Southern California. A woman was quoted saying, “We can’t afford to live the American dream in America, but we leave the smog and enjoy paradise here. We slip across the border and no one notices.” Her creed was “Attain the Good Life Cheap,” because “taxes are

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<sup>72</sup> Norman A. Bert, “The Apostles Creed, Seeker’s Version” *The Wittenburg Door* 199 (May/June 2005), 42. The magazine refers to itself as “The world’s pretty much only religious satire magazine.”

<sup>73</sup> “For the Healing of the World,” *Official Report, LWF Tenth Assembly, Winnipeg, Canada, 21-31 July 2003* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), 61.

<sup>74</sup> Geoffrey Cowley, “The Future of Medicine” *Newsweek Special Edition* (Summer 2005), 9.

laughable.” A man said, concerning border crossing, “I can jump to the front of the line and commute to work in half the time I did in the states.” (There was, of course, no mention by them of Mexican citizens who were simply part of the stage drop in their scenario of “paradise.”)

### Mission:

If one “god” of ACR is money (and “comfort” that goes with money), a mission would be “to acquire.” Some would say the central mission in an “overdeveloped” capitalistic system is to consume.<sup>75</sup> (This mission itself is necessary to the continuation of the established “way of life.”) On the other hand, if one creed of ACR is to be a “generous people,” then compassion is a mission, but because it is more of a self-description than a deeply rooted commitment, the object of ACR communal compassion changes as quickly as the news cameras leave (the direction of the news cameras themselves determined by consumer-driven TV ratings). The missions become complex and contradictory.

*Sample from the media:* The mission of acquisition has its own problems, characterized by two popular cable television shows, “I Want That” and “Mission Organization.” The latter helps people deal with their stuffed-full houses.

The television show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” has been surpassed in popularity by “reality” shows, particularly of the “extreme makeover” kind. The goal of personal physical makeovers is to become “beautiful people.” “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” was very popular in the 2004-2005 season because it combines the goals (mission) of the American dream of having one’s home made into a castle, vicariously through benefiting a needy person. It was mission with a feel good touch.

Congregations have “mission statements.” So do corporations. Doing a comparative study might reveal they sound very much alike, as well as contrastingly different.

### **Challenges for Education for Global Peace and Justice**

So how does all of this relate to education for global peace and justice? The mythical, “holy” history of ACR, used to interpreting itself through the past 230 years, has brought about a current stance toward the world that this author believes is an impediment, and outright danger to global peace and justice. Its creedal theology is significantly different from the “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian” roots it claims for itself. Its ecclesiology is excluding and self-righteously dominating, if not imperialistic. Its mission presumes privilege for the United States of America and therefore “justifies” all manner of unjust and militaristic measures to retain that privileged, “chosen” position. Even its “benevolence” is laced with its own closeness to its self-defined God.

Note a quote from the speech of Senator Albert J. Beveridge, delivered on the floor of the United States Senate shortly after his return from a tour of the Philippines in January 1900. He referred to the importance of the wealth of those islands to the United States, justifying the war of subjugation the United States Army was waging against the Filipino independence movement:

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No. He made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigned. He has given

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<sup>75</sup> See Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.<sup>76</sup>

When I have read this quote to Educational Ministry classes over the years, students will gasp in disbelief that such words about the peoples of the world would have been spoken. In the past three years, students nod their heads in recognition of similar words having been and currently being spoken about the United States' mission in the world today.

Meanwhile, American civil religion's creed of believing it has this messianic role hinders it from clearly seeing how other nations perceive America. An article in the Summer 2005 issue of *Borderlands: A Journal of Theology and Education* published by St. John's College, the University of Durham, England, shows that others clearly see this element in the current U.S. administration:

A sense of personal and national chosenness characterizes the whole of Bush's approach to his presidency...the President does feel that people are called upon by the Divine to undertake certain positions in the world, and undertake certain actions. Bush has made clear on many occasions that he occupies the office by a Divine calling...the U.S. is the new Israel as God's most favoured nation, and those responsible for the state of America in the world also enjoy special favour. For Bush to waver would be to tempt God's disfavour. Wherever the U.S. happens to advance something that he can call "freedom", he thinks he's serving God's will. "The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humanity," Bush said last year. The president's habit of ending his speeches with the homiletic, "May God continue to bless America" is a deliberate attempt by Bush and his speechwriters to reaffirm the notion that the United States has enjoyed divine favour through its history...<sup>77</sup>

"One of the puzzles about the American civil religion is that biblical images of peacemaking through holy war reappear during times of crisis."<sup>78</sup> One can find both "zealous nationalism" and a "prophetic realism" in scripture. The latter could guide an effective response to terrorism, under international law. Zealous nationalism, with its "convert or destroy" (in this case to a doctrine "democracy") strategy seems to be winning out, with the fear of terror and the "loss of freedom" symbolic banners meant to keep support of invading and occupying war alive.

American Civil Religion, as being currently interpreted and used to under gird international war efforts, poses a danger to peace in the world. American civil religion, as being currently interpreted, poses serious challenges to religious educators in the United States.

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<sup>76</sup> Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 116.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Vallely, "The Fifth Crusade" George Bush and the Christianisation of the War in Iraq" *Borderlands: A Journal of Theology and Education* 4 (Summer 2005), 9. Vallely traces the U.S. actions post 9/11 and leading into the Iraq war, citing the work of Professor Bruce Lincoln.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

Religious educators from around the world may recognize ACR and its dangers even more clearly. What are some of those challenges? What further questions do they raise?

1. People in the United States need to discover and understand American civil religion, particularly because it is a formative religious education influence in their daily lives. Only in such self-understanding will they more clearly understand global situations and the people of the world.<sup>79</sup> What are ways that religious educators in the United States might methodologically help people understand ACR, be aware of its history and ever-changing dynamics, not only academically, but in people's daily lives? How might religious educators internationally help people understand civil religions and their effects on their own people and others globally?

2. People of particular faith communities need to gain a deeper knowledge of their own faith traditions and creeds in a way that helps them articulate their faith in the public arenas of their daily lives. The paradox of pluralism is that as people are more deeply and securely rooted, they may become not more, but less afraid of the "stranger," and more open to understanding of the near and global neighbor's faith. How might we teach so that people are both strengthened in their own faith and open to learning from people of other faiths so that we might live less violently, and more peaceably together?

3. In order for any kind of justice and peaceable living together people need to acknowledge and be curious about the many stories.<sup>80</sup> This will mean not trying to fit stories of new immigrants, or those trying to be immigrants into the dominant ACR story, but really listening and learning. How can religious educators not only help faith communities learn their own biblical and ecclesial history, but be grounded enough to be free to learn other's stories without making people into one's own image, a form of idolatry? What renewed and new cultural exchanges might help this goal? How might we work for an opening of borders for learning rather than more restrictive visa policies which exclude people, particularly from the South?

We acknowledge that there are situations in the world that cause fear and distrust. We also believe this makes open dialogue among people from different cultures and nations even more important and that opportunities to come together should be encouraged rather than discouraged.<sup>81</sup>

4. There is an absolute necessity for accessible, affordable public education for all. This does not usurp nor substitute for religious education. An educated citizenry is essential for a participatory democracy. How is this goal different from those who would want to control the public school for a fundamentalist version of ACR? How might a ministry of education for all children in a pluralistic society contribute to peace and justice within a community, a nation and globally?

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<sup>79</sup> Not only would utilizing the resources and methods outlined in this paper be an aid, but also understanding the current confusing ways in which people act against their own best interests and the interests of people around the world. See Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004)

<sup>80</sup> See again, Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* as well as Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America*.

<sup>81</sup> From the "Visa Statement" adopted by consensus by Diakonia, World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities in assembly, July 2005.

5. People, all people, need to be actively educated for tolerance;<sup>82</sup> such tolerance must also lead people to become justice seekers and peacemakers, for there is no lasting peace in the world without justice. The summer 2005 G8 movement to “forgive” debt of impoverished nations and the grassroots movement “Make poverty history” head in this direction. However, just peacemaking is greatly hindered when a U.S. president has insufficient knowledge about those he has branded as “enemy,” when a religious view of being chosen by God dangerously distorts a perception of the reality of the world, when the mission of “bringing democracy” to the world is mentally aligned with that of Crusaders, and when “his intoxication with his own highly charged rhetoric polarizes issues in an unhelpful way through a process of demonisation.”<sup>83</sup> In this current atmosphere how we counter-culturally teach for peace and justice?

6. Religious education within faith communities needs to prepare people to take an active, peaceable place in the public world. This includes becoming change agents for justice, speaking out, voting, writing editorials, organizing, fund raising, and building bridges. American civil religion is a living, ever-changing religion. It is subject to reform! What overarching national ideology is helpful? What public places for participatory democracy are needed? How might religious educators help encourage such public action for individual people?

7. As religious educators we need to help establish and maintain healthy, safe, just, hospitable, local, and global places to be different together.

The importance of having interfaith networks and education in place before a crisis is significant. Kim Wilson, a pastor on Long Island, N.Y., led her people faithfully through the post 9/11 events. At the Baldwin (N.Y.) interfaith prayer service “One thousand people came. The fact that religious leaders here had a vibrant relationship with one another before the crisis was so helpful,” she said. She went on, “We have to be very careful that patriotism is not intermingled with hatred of immigrants.”<sup>84</sup> Three years later she said, “This country had a moment after 9/11 when the world was sympathetic. If we could have responded with nonviolence, we might have led the world. But rather we are experiencing how violence begets more violence.”<sup>85</sup>

Likewise an Anglican deacon from Leeds, U.K, told of the shock of the “events” of July 7, 2005, compounded five days later when the people discovered the bombers were from inside the nation, from Leeds. When the search for more bombs necessitated displacement of blocks of residents of Leeds, temporary shelters that were set up had relatively few people using them, because most people offered their homes for their unknown neighbors, often of another faith. Once again she credits interfaith educational alliances being in place.<sup>86</sup> What other stories of open, safe, hospitable places might be told?

These challenges and more invite peoples of faith within the United States to be aware of and understand the formative influence of American civil religion. Because it is a living, ever-changing religious presence; well-grounded, thoughtful people, along with their religious

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<sup>82</sup> See *Teaching Tolerance*, a magazine published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL, 36104, a resource which produces aids for the classroom.

<sup>83</sup> Valley, “The Fifth Crusade,” 10.

<sup>84</sup> Everist, *Open the Doors and See all the People*, 91.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>86</sup> Told in at the 19<sup>th</sup> Diakonia World Assembly, Durham Cathedral, Sunday, July 24, 2005.

education leaders, need to actively participate in keeping it from becoming idolatrous and dangerous to a just, peaceable world. Through assuring accessible, quality education for all within the United States and globally the world has a chance to become a trustworthy place for us to be different together. This is not only a nice dream, but an urgent need.

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**EDITORIAL NOTE:** As this paper is in the final proof-reading stage, (September 5, 2005) we are surrounded by the news of the Hurricane and flood on the Gulf coast of the United States. Some REA/APPRE members are in the *midst* of this tragedy. Many questions arise. In the “Components of ACR” section above, large arenas were mentioned as shrines, or gathering places. There now is a new meaning for Superbowl (or Superdome) Sunday. Thousands sought last-resort refuge in the Superdome last “Sabbath.” Their rescue from that place, without food, water and sanitary facilities, was not yet complete the following Sunday. Thousands were taken to the Astrodome. Did these ACR “sacred” places provide sanctuary? Why not?

Although one did not hear a belief that God should not send such storms upon the United States, one did hear disbelief that one should see such aftermath scenes “like a third world country,” in the United States. Why is it so difficult to believe that an ecclesiology of exclusivity by race and class exists in the United States? The covenant the United States has made with its people remains broken. Many, including some networks and national officials, could not comprehend that as many as one hundred thousand people in New Orleans did not have cars by which to evacuate and were too poor to have any place to go.

The misperception continued as the victims became the enemy. On the second Sunday, as troops, militarily trained for the “War on Terrorism,” arrived, one saw them standing with guns aimed in all directions rather than simply putting down their weapons and looking for those still trapped. That is not in any way to negate the amazing search and rescue operations, notably by the Coast Guard, but the basic belief systems, creeds and “mission” of ACR, as currently interpreted by some parts of this society, were blatantly harmful to thousands.

Also clear were two contrasting world views (reminiscent of the “paradise” or “savage” images centuries before in regard to native peoples): One newscast showed nurses at Charity hospital singing spirituals as they valiantly tried to keep patients alive after seven days. Theirs was the last hospitable to be evacuated; their patients the poorest. Meanwhile another news organization said all were already evacuated from Charity and that the hospital was full of drug-dealing thugs. They insisted the people who did not leave simply chose not to and wanted to take advantage by becoming law-breaking looters.

And what about the U.S. mission to the world of being a savior to spread the doctrine of democracy? Countries around the world see images of American citizens, mostly poor and African American, being forgotten. Is this what capitalistic “democracy” produces? Who would want to emulate the U.S.A.? Currently over 50 nations have offered aid. The United States, at the time of this final writing, is waiting to see if they will accept such help, particularly the 1100 doctors Cuba is offering, and money and equipment from Russia. Even Sri Lanka offered \$25,000. How can one be the Superpower whose mission it is to convert the world and yet *receive* aid? The opportunity to graciously and humbly receive help, modeling interdependency, could actually help global peace and justice. But will this opportunity also be missed?

More questions will continue. America’s image of itself has been shaken. Will the issues of class and race be addressed, or will the creed of “What’s in it for me?” once again overshadow

justice for all. How will things go in the coming days, weeks, months, years? Who will recover? Even while people from all over the United States offer clothing, money and more, the misperceptions continue. Much early help was thwarted because the people left in New Orleans were thought to be too dangerous. But when one listens to their desperate requests, one can hear that they simply want to know where their family members are. Was it too much to ask that a country with a current creed of “family values” believe them? And to relate to one more national administration policy, why did we not make sure that “No child” was “left behind?”

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