

# Here, There, and (Almost) Everywhere: Civil Religion and Cultural Competency

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## **Abstract:**

When preparing students for study abroad, understanding the religious dimension of the target country/culture is generally viewed as essential for cultural competency training. What is generally left unexamined is the civil religious culture that might be operative. This essay first provides an introduction to the concept as it was introduced by sociologist Robert Bellah and developed in the American context, followed by brief examples from Europe and Japan.

"...wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us...."

-John Winthrop, in a sermon entitled "A Modell of Christian Charity," delivered in 1630 aboard the *Arbella* en route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony (quoted in Bellah 1992, 15)

"I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace ... ." - Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989

## **Introduction**

As a member of the Religious Studies faculty at the University of California, Riverside, I was asked regularly to teach *Religious Myths and Rituals*, a lower-division course that enrolled several hundred students. As an Asianist, I felt ill-qualified to teach a course that served not only as an introduction to the study of religion but also as an examination of religious belief and practice in selected racial/ethnic minority populations in the US. After years of demurring, I realized I could teach the course if I used sociologist Robert Bellah's notion of civil religion as the orienting theme. In studying Japanese society, Bellah noted that "Both Japanese and Americans define nation and people in sacred terms. In Japan this sacredness is primordial: Japan is the divine land, created by the gods [*kami*] and the Japanese people are descended from the gods"; the sacredness of American identity is expressed in terms of "chosen people and promised land" (2003, 60f.).

The course I then developed had three principal learning outcomes. I intended students to gain familiarity with theories and methods in the study of religion; to master information about the communities and practices under study—selected Native American traditions, Haitian vodou in New York City, and Marian devotion among Miami's Cuban exile community; and to discern and analyze manifestations of American civil religion, defined briefly as *a collection of deeply held cultural values and expectations that function to cohere a society through those values, thereby creating a presumption of shared national identity*. In other words, I wanted students to understand the pervasive but often unnoticed cultural

ramifications of an American national identity that has been shaped by notions of being "a sacred people in a sacred land."

The photo banner I chose for the course software—and an image to which I returned periodically during the term—was a picture of Mt. Rushmore. Students were justifiably mystified at first, but once we'd read through *Black Elk Speaks* and subsequent readings on Lakota religiosity, western expansionism, the Ghost Dance, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and its Amendments of 1994, they felt they understood my use of the image as displaying expropriated and violated sacred land. On the final day of class, however, I screened a clip from Ken Burns' documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009), featuring Mt. Rushmore's then-Superintendent Gerard Baker (Mandan-Hidatsa), who talked about his respect for the monument—he called it "the Shrine of Democracy"—and about the complexity of being a Native American in the role of government conservator and interpreter of this particular site. Judging by the students' surprise, hearing Supt. Baker express his heartfelt but mixed emotions was a fitting end to my course—a catalyst, I hoped, for students' own continuing inquiries into the complex intersections of religion and American identity. Happily, my hopes have been realized: former students continue to send souvenirs, postcards, and photos from civil religious sites and events all across the country, many years after having taken the course.

In 2012, I offered a faculty-led study abroad course on *Religion, Secularism, and Civil Society*, taking students to the Netherlands and Germany for nearly a month, and then culminating with a week in Washington, DC. In each location, we studied historical relations between church and state, the role of religion in shaping national culture, and the cultural challenges all three nations face in determining the role religion plays in what it means to be Dutch, German, and American today. Although the term did not appear in the course title, all our work was oriented around notions of civil religion, a critical but understudied element in intercultural education.

The present paper first offers a somewhat extended look at the American case to illuminate the evolution of Bellah's notion; it then offers illustrative examples beyond US borders to suggest the ubiquity of the phenomenon and its utility for study abroad professionals when developing cultural competency training for students.

## The U.S. Case

The term "civil religion" was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1762 treatise *On the Social Contract*. Rousseau's civil religion—a middle ground between a personal religion and an established state religion—had as its basic elements belief in the existence of a deity and in an afterlife; the promotion of toleration; and adherence to the social contract in which there is justice under law. Alexis de Tocqueville, the first observer of civil religion in the American context, described what he called "republican religion" in his treatise *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), namely, a system in which particular beliefs, constitutionally disconnected from government, are left to private judgment. More than two centuries after Rousseau, in an essay prepared for a 1966 conference on American religion, University of California, Berkeley sociologist Robert N. Bellah drew on Rousseau, de Tocqueville, and the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim to describe a deeply felt and widely shared "religious" sensibility that affirms a people's common sense of national identity. In the case of the United States,

The...separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be

strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion (1967, 3-4).

Bellah embraced Durkheim's understanding that all collectivities have a religious aspect to them. Societies adhere to a common set of totemic symbols and shared values, making it natural that a country or modern nation-state would have its own "religion," by which is meant a shared set of values and symbols that give it "the emotional integrity to cohere" (Juergensmeyer et al. 2015, 78). Bellah's paper was published subsequently in *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, for an issue entitled, "Religion in America." It became, in Bellah's words, "an essay I have never been allowed to forget" (Bellah & Hammond 1980, 3). Half a century later, to quote Bellah again, the vast literature on civil religion constitutes "a minor academic industry" (1992, ix).

As the expression of what binds citizens as "Americans," civil religion is obvious and yet often unnoticed (or unremarked upon) in daily life. International students coming to study in the US are likely to know that religion, particularly Protestant evangelical Christianity, plays a prominent role in contemporary American culture. The surprise lies in discovering not only the variety of traditions and the pervasiveness of religious/spiritual concerns in American culture but also the extent to which acceptance, and even the expectation, of *civil* religious ideas and practices suffuses daily life in the States.

In recent decades, the metaphors of onions, trees, and, especially, icebergs have been employed in cultural studies as heuristic devices. The idea is that every distinct culture has visible and invisible aspects. Visible aspects of culture—the skin of the onion, the leaves and branches of the tree, or the tip of the iceberg—are those which are readily accessible to outside observers, e.g., holiday celebrations, dress, art, music, food. The invisible aspects represent essential cultural values and structures that, depending on the metaphor employed, support, form the core of, or nourish and sustain the visible aspects of culture. These underlying values and structures include shared understandings of history, politics, family life, social mores, religion. To use the iceberg metaphor for a moment, it's clear that the bulk of a culture is not immediately visible. Discerning what lies beneath the surface—while avoiding smashing into it—takes time and training. Civil religion is part of this deep structure, supporting beliefs, symbols, and rituals that provide a religious dimension to the visible cultural artifacts of everyday life.

Calling this dimension "religious" points to its provision of an implicit framework of values and ethics shared by a majority of citizens, as well as to a cohesive structure of myths, texts, material objects, revered persons, and an entire landscape of natural or built "sacred" environments. In the American context, identifying artifacts of civil religious culture might begin with the following:

#### Texts ("scriptures")

- the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, both of which are enshrined at the National Archives in Washington, DC
- the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address
- John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address
- Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech"

### Material objects

- the Liberty Bell
- the Statue of Liberty
- the White House and the Capitol Building
- the Lincoln Bible
- the Star-Spangled Banner, Old Glory, and the American flag in general

### Landscape

- The Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument
- Gettysburg battlefield, Arlington National Cemetery, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial
- Ground Zero in lower Manhattan; Flight 93 National Memorial (Shanksville, PA)
- Many lesser known local sites, e.g., the Liberty Bell Shrine/Museum (where the Liberty Bell was hidden from 1777 until the British occupation of Philadelphia ended in 1778, Allentown, PA), or the Lincoln Memorial Shrine (a museum and research facility dedicated to Lincoln and the Civil War, Redlands, CA)
- Mt. Rushmore

### People ("prophets," "saints," and martyrs)

- George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Nathan Hale
- Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Eleanor Roosevelt, Christa McAuliffe

### Myths

- America as the Promised Land or the New Jerusalem
- America as "the shining city on the hill"
- Americans as the Chosen People, as suggested in the motto on the Great Seal of the United States: *annuit coeptis* ("Providence favors our undertakings," or "Providence has favored our undertakings")

### Ceremonies and holidays ("rituals" and "holy days")

- Independence Day (the Fourth of July)
- Memorial Day
- Thanksgiving

Bellah and other scholars have highlighted Independence Day and Memorial Day as the premier American civil religious holidays (Warner 1962, 8-9). However, many countries have their own national days of independence and mourning/commemoration, making the "iceberg" metaphor of the Fourth of July or Memorial Day rise high in the water: students can observe such holidays and appreciate much of the rationale, even if some underlying details are unclear. A more subtle illustration in the American context is Thanksgiving. In addition to analyzing the artifacts of food and family rituals, the civil religious dimension and its tensions can be discerned through an examination of each year's Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation, published by the White House on the day in major US newspapers and online sources.

The first Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued by the Continental Congress in 1777. George Washington issued the first Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1789, and President Lincoln's

second Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863 initiated the unbroken string of presidential proclamations of thanks for the year's blessings that continues to today. All the proclamations, including those issued by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, have been archived online by the Pilgrim Hall Museum of Plymouth, MA ([pilgrimhallmuseum.org](http://pilgrimhallmuseum.org)). An especially instructive example is provided by President Reagan's 1986 Proclamation, which opens as follows:

Perhaps no custom reveals our character as a Nation so clearly as our celebration of Thanksgiving Day. Rooted deeply in our Judeo-Christian heritage, the practice of offering thanksgiving underscores our unshakable belief in God as the foundation of our Nation and our firm reliance upon Him from Whom all blessings flow. Both as individuals and as a people, we join with the Psalmist in song and praise: "Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good."

In addition to elevating the nation to the "Nation" and locating Thanksgiving within the sphere of "our Judeo-Christian" belief, the text confirms that all Americans know "God" to be the bedrock of America. The assumption of shared religious experience is further indicated by the indirect reference to a widely used brief hymn of praise, the Protestant Doxology ("Praise God from whom all blessings flow") and by quoting "the Psalmist" with a common phrase found several times in the Book of Psalms of the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament.

The Proclamation then presents "one of the most inspiring portrayals of American history" in the dramatic image of George Washington "on his knees in the snow at Valley Forge." Students, especially if they are French, may be surprised to continue reading: "It was then—when our mettle as a Nation was tested most severely—that the Sovereign and Judge of nations heard our plea and came to our assistance in the form of aid from France." The Proclamation continues on to reiterate President Washington's exhortation to the people of the US to observe "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer" so that they might acknowledge "with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness." President Reagan's Proclamation then closes with its own exhortation:

And let us be ever mindful of the faith and spiritual values that have made our Nation great and that alone can keep us great. With joy and gratitude in our hearts, let us sing these stirring stanzas:

O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
America! America!  
God shed His grace on thee.

By urging the reader to "sing" the words to the first verse of "America the Beautiful," the Proclamation dares the reader to not hear the music. In this way, the reader is drawn into the text, becoming a voice in the civil religious choir, willingly or not.

To read through the Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations issued during the two world wars, the Great Depression, the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam war, the aftermath of September 11 and the years since, is to observe the evolution of American civil religious sensibilities. After 9/11,

"community centers" and, later, "mosques" are added to "churches, synagogues, and houses of worship" to acknowledge the somewhat awkward presence of Islam in America; Native Americans come and go in the narratives across the years; and attention to social ills as well as blessings characterize contradictory American attitudes toward individual wealth and the common welfare. As a resource for study abroad professionals, Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations provide a rich guide to seeing below the surface (or digging deeper to the core or roots) of American civil religious culture.

Beyond icebergs, onions, and trees are other approaches to talking about culture and the possibilities of variation. For example, we might liken it to mental software:

Just like computers, people are "*programmed*" by their culture to think, act, feel in a certain way. As opposed to computers, however, people do have individual personalities. Therefore, not everyone will represent all cultural norms all the time. [However, even] deviation will happen within certain boundaries established by culture. This programming of the mind happens outside of our awareness, which is the reason most of us cannot explain why we behave, think or act the way we do. Most people would not be able to connect their behavior with general characteristics of their culture (Knight 2009).

In an informal and decidedly unscientific test, I and several co-facilitators led a group of about sixty study abroad professionals in a cultural competency workshop held during the 2017 Annual Conference of the University of California's Education Abroad Program. After viewing a short video on icebergs, onions, and trees as cultural metaphors, participants were divided into six smaller groups, with each group assigned to come up with two or three artifacts of "American culture" and then to utilize one of the metaphors to discuss the deep or core structure(s) that inform each artifact. We acknowledged awareness of diversity and difference as a hallmark of contemporary American society but due to time constraints asked participants to think of cultural artifacts that could be recognized—if not accepted or uniformly interpreted—across ethnic, racial, gender, and other categories of personal identity.

The resulting robust discussion revealed that no matter which metaphor a group employed to analyze a contemporary artifact (among the artifacts identified by the groups were the flag, baseball, and guns), the rough consensus was that any explanation was historically grounded. At the heart of the submerged mass of the iceberg, the core of the onion, or the roots of the tree were the history of America as "revolutionary," the centrality of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and the legacy of Puritanism. None of us had predicted the emphasis on history that would emerge, nor had we facilitators anticipated that the Constitution would be central to every group's analysis. The other, less surprising outcomes were frequent references to the contradictions that a cultural artifact presented to different groups of Americans, and a shared sense that such contradictions have to be held in some kind of tension in order to be valid.

Philip Gorski, professor of sociology and religious studies at Yale University, addressed the inherent contradictions in American civil religion during an interview about his book, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. He suggested that core contradictions originate with varying interpretations of our national history:

"The radical-secular interpretation of American history is that American democracy is an Enlightenment project based solely on secular values. The religious-nationalist interpretation

is that America was founded as a Christian nation, and our laws and Constitution are all grounded in Christian or Judeo-Christian scripture. ...[However, at] many junctures of our history, those two sources have been intertwined.... One of my favorite examples of this is Benjamin Franklin's draft seal for the United States. The image is of Moses parting the Red Sea and the Israelites crossing over behind him. Franklin can hardly be suspected of being a particularly orthodox Christian, yet he thought this narrative belied something fundamental about the American project" (Green 2017).

Of note is Gorski's reference to "so-called Judeo-Christian heritage." Although ample evidence today attests to the presence of those who steadfastly maintain that the US is "a Christian nation," the fact is that the early colonies were settled and states were established by religious communities that included Roman Catholics, Jews, and, owing to African enslavement, Muslims. The now-common phrase "Judeo-Christian" originated in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England, and was popularized in the United States in the 1930s to counter rising nativism during the Depression; during the 1950s, use of the term served two purposes: it represented historic "Western" values in Cold War contrast to those of atheist Communism, and it offered a veneer of inclusion to the post-Holocaust and politically active American Jewish community. By the mid-20th century, the acceptance of Judaism and religions such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) into the rubric of American civil religion deemed it capable of transcending denomination and religious affiliation. Under the aegis of what Benjamin Franklin had called "public religion" and Abraham Lincoln referred to as "political religion," it was widely understood that Americans could hold a shared civic faith and express a public piety while professing divergent personal religious/spiritual beliefs.

Within the scholarly community, however, critics such as religion scholars Charles Long and Jane Iwamura pointed out that Bellah's "transcendent universal religion of the nation" excluded minority populations: African Americans and Asian Americans, in particular, were expected to embrace the symbols, saints, and celebrations of American civil religion without being able to reap the promise of its core myths. Moreover, the thousands of immigrants from Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East who arrived in the US after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 helped to make visible religions that were long-established in the US but which were persecuted or ignored, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, a variety of Eastern Orthodox traditions, and Islam. By the mid-1970s, it was no longer tenable to describe the US as a tri-religious nation of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

As both the political landscape and the demographics of American society changed over the course of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bellah continued to revisit his work. In 1975, less than a decade after the *Daedalus* article, Bellah published the first edition of *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, commenting on what he saw as the growth of self-interest, the increasing fragmentation of American society, and the alienation of many sectors of society. It appeared to Bellah that civil religion was no longer able to provide the unity and sense of shared belongings he had earlier discussed, and he called American civil religion a "broken and empty shell" (1992, 142).

Yet even as Bellah continued to revise his thinking on the subject, the "minor academic industry" churned on. Scores of publications continued to appear, typically either applying the concept to other nations and cultures, or else questioning its validity and continued viability: Do the shared assumptions and values of civil religion make it primarily a religion of the masses rather than the elite, or is it yet another construct used by the elite to control and manipulate the masses? What

is the relation, if any, of civil religion to the state or to traditional religions in increasingly fragmented or secularized modern societies?

### **Beyond the U.S. Case**

In the U.S. context, civil religion has been shown to represent a fusion of national identity with one or more historically dominant religions, yielding artifacts of culture that are accepted but may be under-examined by natives. In the US, so-called blue laws, also known as Sunday laws, are remnants of colonial New England Puritan piety that regulate leisure and commercial activities. Most Americans will be familiar with restrictions on the location or timing of alcohol sales; in some states, for example, although grocery stores may open for business on Sunday morning, aisles where alcoholic beverages are stocked are required to be roped off. But how many citizens are aware that, across the US, various states still maintain legislation prohibiting activities such as horse-racing, hunting, or car sales on the day originally designated for worship?

In Western Europe, similar examples exist of cultural habits and artifacts derived from (and revealing) civil religious conditions. The Dutch, for example, tend not to cover their ground floor windows; if there are draperies, they are often not drawn, even at night. Historically, there might have been lace curtains that allowed in plenty of light and permitted a degree of two-way visibility; absent curtains, the window sills might have had an array of potted plants, vases of cut flowers, or treasured *objet d'art*. Now, in the early 21st century, café curtains, "sun-catchers," or bands of decorative frosted glass often shield ground floor rooms from the eyes of daytime passers-by, but night still finds the front room life of the residents on display.

The Dutch are disciplined, rule-driven, and thrifty, and they bare their lives to their neighbors, inviting their gaze. The absence of curtains is both proof of the residents' virtue and an example to their neighbors, all of whom are assumed to share these values. This assumption is reinforced in everyday conversation by appeals to common aphorisms such as "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down" and "Doing what's normal is crazy enough," underscoring the Netherlands' Calvinist heritage of expected behavior and communal scrutiny. Recalling my first experience abroad, as a student in Amsterdam, I remember vividly the day that my Dutch homestay mother harrumphed indignantly around the house because the neighbors across the back yard had hung cheerful gingham curtains on their kitchen window. It was as if they'd slammed a door in her face. (And just what were they hiding?)

The American form of civil religion is a non-denominational tradition that, although rooted in the values and rhetoric of conservative Protestantism, nonetheless champions the separation of church and state. The boundaries between religion and the state are negotiated legally and are sometimes mediated informally by civil religious practices, an example being the designation of Christmas Day as a federal holiday. Under the provisions of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, there can be no legislation either establishing a state religion or prohibiting the free expression of religion by US citizens. A significant contrast to the American understanding of church-state relations—and the separation of personal and public life—is provided by France and Italy, both predominantly Roman Catholic countries that are among the most popular destinations for American students studying abroad.

The French famously embrace the concept of *laïcité*, generally translated as "secularism," but more deeply understood as a general principle that encompasses and reconciles the particular values of the various religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, and political communities living in France. *Laïcité*

comprises “a cluster of universal and abstract values that every citizen and group must embrace independently from his or her origins, preferences, and belongings” (S. Ferrari 2010, 751). In a speech entitled *Discours relatif au respect du principe de laïcité dans la république* [Speech on Respecting the Principle of Secularism in the Republic], delivered on December 17, 2003, former President Jacques Chirac emphasized the importance of this distinctly French principle as follows:

*Laïcité* is inscribed in our traditions. It is at the heart of our republican identity.... It is with faith in the principle of *laïcité*, the cornerstone of the Republic, the beacon of our common values of respect, tolerance, and dialogue, that I call upon all French men and women to unite.... These are the values which make France (Chelini-Pont, trans. 2010, 768).

Americans embrace these same values. The telling difference between the American and the French contexts is that American civil religion acknowledges that cherished values are mined from the bedrock of national religious history but then dissociates them from religion through the separation of church and state, which both limits and permits religion in the public sphere. In the French constitutional model of *laïcité*, the separation of church and state is strict, and religion has little, if any, public relevance. In the US, the First Amendment prohibits the teaching of religion in public elementary and secondary schools, but American schools are permitted to teach *about* religion; in France, both religion and politics are to remain outside the classroom. In the US, there are few restrictions on the wearing of religious garb, and new religious movements are generally protected under the First Amendment, whereas French courts have upheld bans on the wearing of religious garb or symbols in public institutions or public places, and the government has at times exercised aggressive policies toward new religious movements, e.g., the Church of Scientology. In short, the American understanding of church-state separation is confined to the relationship between religion and the state; French *laïcité* can affect the full range of interactions among religion, politics, and society as a whole (S. Ferrari 2010, 756). Students studying in France will daily encounter core cultural representations of the uniqueness and grandeur of French language and culture, the strong sense of French exceptionalism and resistance, and pride in its *difference*—all expressed without reference to religion.

If there is no public role for religion in France, then the opposite condition is presented by the Italian model of church-state relations, where the public role of religion is monopolized almost exclusively by Roman Catholicism, even though it was fully disestablished in 1984. Scholar of religion and law Silvio Ferrari explains that the Italian government attempts to govern the "ethical, cultural, and religious plurality of the country through the values of Catholicism, raised to the rank of civil religion" (2010,753).

More precisely, Catholicism supplies the cultural and ethical principles on which full citizenship is based. ... The debate about the crucifix is the best example of the Italian interpretation of civil religion. In Italian public schools, a crucifix must be hung on the walls of every classroom. Faced with requests to remove it, the courts have stated that the crucifix is not only a religious symbol but also the symbol of Italian identity. In particular, it manifests the historical and cultural tradition of Italy and is a sign of a value system based on freedom, equality, human dignity, and religious tolerance. Because citizenship is founded on these same values, which should be respected by everyone, the presence of the crucifix in the classroom cannot be made dependent on the religious convictions of the students (2010, 754).

In February 2006, the Italian Council of State further clarified the meaning of the crucifix, declaring it a symbol of Italian *laicità*, as explained again by Ferrari:

In Italy the principles that are at the base of the idea of *laïcité* have a religious origin. Thus, the best way to manifest the secular character of the Italian school is through the crucifix in the classroom. This conclusion does not mean that the crucifix is deprived of its religious significance. But, according to the Court, it has a different meaning depending on the place where it is situated. When the crucifix is placed in a church or another place of worship, it is only a religious symbol. When it is placed in a school, it becomes a tool for educating students—independently from their religious beliefs—about values that are at the core of the notion of *laïcité*, such as tolerance, mutual respect, human dignity, human solidarity, and non-discrimination.

The courts went even further, noting that the fact that a growing number of non-Christian students are attending Italian schools underlines the need for the crucifix because it propagates the principles of respect for diversity and refusal of radicalism (both religious and secular) that are at the foundation of the Italian legal system and that may not be familiar to students of other cultures and religions (2010, 754).

Scholars such as Ferrari understand these court decisions to express in legal terms the idea that only the Catholic tradition can be the civil religion of Italy and provide the fundamental principles and values on which social cohesion is founded. Others disagree, understanding social cohesion in Italy to be the product of a "natural, cultural-religious homogeneity" rather than any common bond of citizenship. In this view, cultural-religious homogeneity has resulted in the absence of an Italian "civil religion" (A. Ferrari 2010, 843). On the one hand, this perception is supported by the absence of restrictions on the wearing of religious garb and the personal display of religious symbols in public spaces and institutions. On the other, American students studying in Italy are struck by the dominating Vatican presence in the news and in politics, even if their Italian classmates and teachers profess little adherence to the faith.

Students studying abroad in Poland will likewise confront a "cultural-religious homogeneity" wherein the Roman Catholic Church monopolizes the public sphere, yet its identification with the state has a complex historical background quite different from the Italian case. During the Second World War, the church supported the resistance against German occupation and thus forged a distinctively "Polish" identity for itself. After the war, the church's identification with the nation was reinforced by the wartime eradication of the Polish Jewry, the massive Polish-Ukrainian resettlements, and the redrawing of Poland's borders, all of which combined such that "almost the entire population of post-World War II Poland was, at least formally and for the first time in modern Polish history, homogeneously Catholic" (Casanova 1994, 94). As in other countries of the former Soviet bloc, socialist attempts to suppress or supplant religion failed; instead, the church "became the cherished trustee of the nation's history, culture, and traditions, and of the collective memories of the Polish people" (Casanova 1994, 95)—a status that continues today and which fuels anti-immigrant policies and privileges social policies in accordance with Church doctrines.

Bellah's early academic research focused on Japan, and sociologists and religion scholars who followed him have sought to confirm or contest Bellah's characterization of the Japanese as a sacred people in a sacred land (2003, 60). Today, Shinto nationalism, as evidenced by conflicts over the meaning of visits by government officials to the Yasukuni Shrine (a shrine to Japanese war dead that includes noted war criminals and thus appears to forgive or gloss over wartime crimes and

atrocities), is a surface artifact suggesting a more deeply rooted cultural reality. Shinto may have been disestablished under the terms of the Allied occupation after Japan's defeat in World War II, but the legacies of Shinto tradition are daily present in emphases on reverence for the past, and on purity and cleanliness in the physical environment. Most shops in Japan have a small shrine on the premises, thereby preserving Shinto in the visual landscape of everyday life (Swyngedouw 1992, 57). Adding to the Shinto foundation are virtues of filiality, deference, and obedience derived from Confucian traditions imported centuries ago from China and Korea, alongside notions of discipline, public service, and a natural aesthetic deriving from Buddhism, another imported yet non-competing tradition.

Despite these multiple influences and decades of modern industrialized urban life, the world of postwar Japan has yielded outwardly secular and seemingly westernized attitudes, especially among young people. Yet there remains

...an amorphous yet strong trend in contemporary Japanese social, cultural and religious life towards the idealization of traditional Japanese culture and landscape, and of the Japanese past. It is especially prevalent in such emotionally-laden terms and concepts as *furusato*, a term literally meaning "one's native village," which is suggestive of a Japanese landscape and community steeped in Japanese cultural traditions and unsullied by external, modernizing and westernizing influences (Reader 1994, 11f.)

For the foreign student, then, the absence of "religion" in Japan is confounded by its omnipresence and with its close identification with "being" Japanese.

### **Germany: An Instance Apart?**

Bellah viewed civil religion as developing naturally within a society as a means of cohering the citizenry, so we might expect it to be nearly universal. And beyond Bellah's foci on Japan and the US, a rich body of literature has emerged to analyze the presence (or absence) of civil religion in countries as far afield as China, Uruguay, Tunisia, Mexico, and Egypt—all far beyond the scope of this paper to explore (see, e.g., Lyon & Van Die 2000) but all offering study abroad professionals a wealth of insight into another country's mode of citizenship or a nation's national identity. Such national self-understanding can be predicated upon an explicit religious identification, whether overt or covert (Italy, Japan); a semi-specific diffuse identification (the US, the Netherlands); or as an identity apart, even if derived from religious identification (France). Germany offers yet one other distinctive model, an instance of "a void that is left in the interplay between religion and a nation's self-understanding" (Wabel 2013, 215).

Students studying in Berlin cannot escape Germany's culture of remembrance, memorialization, and, perhaps, expiation. In the heart of the city is American architect Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial, also formally titled "the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." Neither a Jewish memorial nor an explicitly religious site, the 4.7 acre Memorial nonetheless focuses attention on the triumph of a false narrative of national identity devoid of the religious values that were a prominent facet of German cultural identity for centuries.

The monument...is a vast field of concrete steles, arranged with small alleys between the steles, just south of the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate. The ground slopes in several directions, and the steles become higher and higher the closer you get to the center, so that upon entering and continuing through one of the alleys, people are lost in the field and

disappear. If you enter the field on a warm and sunny day, you feel the cold climbing up the deeper you get in, the noises of the city become more and more muffled, and it gets darker and darker between the mounting walls of concrete. As it is apt for a memorial to the victims, the spectator slowly enters the victim's perspective, but the spectator does not experience direct and unmitigated shock and horror. Rather, the transformation is a slow and subtle one, interrupted by views of the sky and (initially) the surrounding trees, by the sight of children playing hide-and-seek between the steles, and by the voices of others entering the central area, until these voices, too, gradually fade away—an experience comparable only to the...growing madness of the persecution and the experience of a concentration camp.... There is neither direct confrontation with the historical facts nor direct transformation into the language of accusation or repentance, of grief, or of relief that these times are over (Wabel 2013, 215f).

Eisenman's work undermines all attempts to give a simple or direct interpretation of the moral history of Germany—it leaves a void in these attempts. It avoids self-flagellation, and sensationalism, and voyeurism, yet it forces attention and reflection as to who Germans were and are, and what Germany was and now tries to be in light of its past. More than a Holocaust memorial, the Monument represents a civil religion in the making.

## Conclusion

Civil religion gets very little careful thought. But we live in it, and we appeal to it all of the time.

-Rowland A. Sherrill (quoted in Murray 2008, 42)

Even in a postmodern and fragmenting world, civil religion can be seen to engender and sanction "a sense of collective destiny" and/or to provide "integration among an otherwise diverse people" (Hiller 2000, 169). The analysis of this often-invisible concept was initiated by sociologist Robert Bellah in his *Daedalus* article and then revisited, sometimes reluctantly, by him over the ensuing decades. Shortly before his death in 2013, he joked that some people thought it was the only thing he had written (Juergensmeyer et al. 2015, 78). Though far from true, it is clearly the case that it remains a rich tool for study abroad professionals who seek to deepen their students' predeparture preparation (or post-return reflection). Whether examined in terms of the bottom of the iceberg, the core of the onion, or the roots of a tree, the presence and influence of civil religion is almost always significant. The presence of religious practices, material objects, or public attitudes assuming religious identity (or the notable absence of these artifacts) should spur reflection on the civil religious history and aspirations that inform them; without that further reflection on civil religion, the role and meaning of the observed artifacts of culture may well remain opaque.

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