

# Twin Gods, Twin Fears: Religion and Politics

Written by Mark Cladis

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## Twin Gods, Twin Fears: Religion and Politics

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MARK CLADIS, AUG 24 2012

### I. The Twin Gods and Fears Become One

Once again, we find ourselves in an age when many inside and out of the academy are thinking and talking about religion—*specifically about religion in public and whether it ought to be there*. This is not the first time, and it will not be the last. But the issue of religion in public and politics has taken many by surprise this time. Many of us assumed that modernity would necessarily usher in secularism, that is, would launch an age in which religion had no significant, public standing. We were wrong. Religion as an intellectual, cultural, and political force is not, for the most part, waning on the globe.

The question of religion and politics—that is, the question of the appropriate relation between the two—is an old one. Ancient Israel, for example, wrestled with the king's relation to the priesthood; early Roman pagans and Christians debated the emperor's divine status; medieval Christianity in the West was marked by power struggles between the "secular" (temporal) and religious spheres; early Protestant Christianity debated the application of Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, the civil and the spiritual; and ever since James Madison interpreted Luther's doctrine as an account of the separation of church and state, North Americans have passionately argued over the meaning and utility of the Wall of Separation.

The question of religion and politics becomes more complex if we include in our consideration *civil* or *political religion*. Unlike confessional or traditional religion (Hinduism and Christianity, for example), which typically makes reference to God, gods, or some other sacred beings, civil religion has the sociological and psychological *form* of traditional religion (enduring beliefs and practices, powerful ideals and symbols, tutored passions and emotions) but it does not have the traditionally religious *content*. Debates over the role of civil religion and traditional religion in relation to the political are not new. Around the time of the American Revolution, for example, Benjamin Franklin endorsed a civil "Publick Religion" to inculcate civic virtue while at the same time he opposed any state-sponsored traditional religion. And not long before the French Revolution, Rousseau condemned "blood thirsty," nationalistic traditional religions even as he advocated an enforceable civil religion with tolerance as its centerpiece.

The question of religion and politics, then, is not new, but the context in which we are asking the question is new in salient ways. We are bringing to the question particular lessons learned from our history. Some of these lessons were available to Rousseau, Franklin, and their generation. For example, they had learned from The Thirty Years' War—in which one third of the German population perished—that traditional religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism can lead to the slaughter of millions. Political liberalism, broadly understood, has taken to heart the profound lesson that confessional religions can be extremely dangerous. Yet unlike Rousseau and Franklin, today we also know about the terror that flowed in the twentieth century from what some call secular political or civil religions, that is, political and civil institutions that became charged with the sacred and appeared to function as a religion. Mussolini's fascism, Hitler's Nazism, and even Russian Bolshevism have all been plausibly declared to be religious, when suitably defined by something like a broad, Durkheimian interpretation of religion. Of the danger of these political regimes, we are all well aware.

And so today when we see what appears to be the resurgence of religion in politics, we cannot help but think about

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lessons from the past and become alarmed. We fear, for example, what is commonly called the Christian right in the U.S. and Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Indonesia. To make matters worse, this subset of Christians and Muslims often appears to be wedding their traditional, confessional religions to a civil religion, thereby making the situation all the more potentially dangerous. Our twin fears—one about dangerous confessional religion, the other about dangerous civil religion—have converged. And with the apparent increase of religious fundamentalism in conjunction with civil religion, the promise and sanity of political liberalism has become all the more alluring. And sure enough, many liberal political theorists are once again writing about religion, and many are advocating that religion be rendered safe by consigning it to the private sphere—the sphere of the voluntary association, the family, or the individual. In most cases, a premise of this liberal approach is that traditional religion has great potential to introduce division and therefore conflict into the public and political life of the state.

Although it is a recognizable position held by many, it is important to recognize the limits of these broad terms, “liberal approach,” “liberal theorists,” and especially, “liberalism.” For example, that liberal theorist Rawls increasingly moved beyond the standard liberal approach, as has Habermas, assuming it is apt to call Habermas a liberal. Even Richard Rorty, who for most of his life argued that religion should be consigned to the private life, offered in his later positions a somewhat less restrictive view. In any case, liberalism need not be necessarily identified with promoting privatized views of religion, or—for that matter—individualistic conceptions of political or social orders. It is not an oxymoron to speak of liberal characters, traditions, or communities.

Sequestering religious belief to the private sphere is the view that most Rawlsian (Kantian) liberals hold today. The idea is to keep religion out of public, political debate because on this view: 1) religion is based on beliefs not subject to public reasoning; and 2) religion is therefore divisive. It is more difficult to generalize about liberalism and the other religious threat—that of political or civil religion—because most liberal theorists have either ignored or denied the very category of civil or political religion. But it is easy to imagine that if a liberal theorist were to accept, say, that Mussolini’s fascism was a form of religion, then oppressive civil religions of all kinds would be condemned on the basis of their threat to individual liberty and freedom of conscience.

Liberalism, then, and its approach to religion are looking attractive, for many are increasingly fearful that much of the world seems to be embracing a dangerous combination of religious fundamentalism and civil religion. While many are wary of religion in public and political life the liberal approach to religion in public—namely, the privatization of religion—is not an adequate response to our justified fears. The liberal approach to religion is a temptation that should be resisted. It is neither feasible nor prudent. It is not feasible because illiberal means would need to be employed to achieve the liberal goal of the privatization of religion. And it is not prudent because religious perspectives potentially have much to contribute to the common moral projects of a nation and of the global community. Some religious perspectives, of course, could prove to be destructive. But unless one holds an essentialistic view of religion, one will maintain that religious perspectives, like all other comprehensive systems of belief (utilitarian, Marxist, or hedonist, for example), cannot be usefully generalized with respect to whether they are politically or morally beneficial or harmful.

Unfortunately, liberal approaches to religion often *do* essentialize religion. There is often a tacit belief or assumption that *authentic* religion is a private, *inward* affair of conscience, and that if religion does move “outward” and intermingle with politics, then it is no longer authentic and becomes potentially destructive. Public religion, in this view, is by definition inauthentic religion, and the most dangerous forms of inauthentic religion are manifested in religious fundamentalism, antidemocratic civil religion, or some combination of the two.

This liberal bias about the nature of authentic (that is, inward and spiritual) religion is occasionally found, at least implicitly, in work on political religion: religion in the public and political spheres is typically held suspect. Yet this essentialistic and spiritualized view of authentic religion is highly parochial. It is a romantic, nineteenth century, Protestant view found in such theologians as Friedrich Schleiermacher. In spite of its parochial origins, however, this spiritualized notion of religion has greatly informed the view of many about religion’s true nature, namely, that religion pertains ineffably to the inner recesses of the individual’s heart and not to the concrete public domain of power and politics.

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This spiritualized view of religion will necessarily generate suspicion and fear about Islam or other religions that are often manifestly involved in the public and political spheres. It will also cause worry about “civil religion,” a form of religion that is necessarily public and political. As noted earlier, these twin fears—fear of traditional religion in public and of civil religion—are now coming together. For example, in his recent book, *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile, one of the main theorists of political religion, has a section titled “Bolshevism Like Islam” (Emilio Gentile, pp. 38 and 40. The heading likens Lenin’s Bolshevism, clearly a dangerous political movement, to what has become for many the paradigm of dangerous traditional religion—Islam.

So, once again we find ourselves asking about religion and what to do about it. Are we heading into a new age of global religious totalitarianism? Is theocracy on the rise? Should we attempt to keep religion out of politics? How are we to think about the relation between religion and the public and political spheres?

In response to these questions, four models of religion in society are proposed: 1) *Religion Over the Public Landscape* (in which religion is necessary for the health of public and political life); 2) *Religion Banned from the Public Landscape* (in which religion is kept out of public and political life); 3) *Public Landscape as Religious Space* (in which the health of the republic depends on a shared, civil religion); and 4) *Public Landscape as Varied Topography* (in which religion is not initially treated as a special case, but rather is treated like any other more or less comprehensive view that may offer a voice in public and political debate). This final model, which is favored, challenges those who would attempt to render religion safe in democracies by relegating religious belief and practice to the private sphere. It also challenges, however, those who claim that a vital, robust democracy requires a religious citizenry.

Although these models are in the context of my own political and cultural home, namely, the U.S., I believe the models have applicability outside my own context. Nonetheless, the conclusions about the models will need to be critically appropriated in light of a society’s specific social and historical circumstances: its particular histories, institutions, struggles, ideals, and hopes. Toward the end of the article, I briefly argue for what I call progressive *spiritual democracy*—a particular stance that operates from within my favored model. It is a dynamic, lively, culturally specific and culturally contested *embodied* democracy. It does not mean a mystical, nationalistic political body, a utopian aspiration, nor a democracy based on supposed transcendent or immutable ideals. *Spiritual*, in this context, does not refer to anything unhistorical or disembodied. Instead, the term is employed to capture the various socio-cultural aspects of a robust democracy, encompassing a nation’s character, its citizens’ diverse identities, and a distinctively democratic transactional relation between the two.

The proposal for *spiritual democracy* will raise some of the relevant questions about civil religion—what exactly is civil or political religion and should we necessarily be fearful of it? Ultimately, it will be shown that civil or political religion per se is not inevitably dangerous; in fact, a democratic civil religion—or what could be called a democratic culture—is a *necessary measure to protect us from totalitarian and theocratic religion*. In sum, then, I will argue that there are at least two forms of religion in public that liberalism unnecessarily fears: 1) diverse traditional religions, when suitably embedded in a democratic culture; and 2) democratic civil religion, when suitably defined.

## II. Landscapes of the Two Gods

### 1) *Religion Over the Public Landscape*

According to this model, religion is necessary for the health of the public and political life in the U.S. By *religion*, I mean what is traditionally called religion (organized, historical religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, or Christianity) as opposed to a Rousseauian civil religion or to a broad Durkheimian notion of religion. In this model, religion is necessary to inculcate virtues that sustain a vital citizenry. Such virtues might include justice, moral reasoning, and

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courage or humility, hope, and love. While these virtues may be fostered primarily in such private settings as homes and voluntary associations, they are exercised in public for the sake of the public. According to this model, if religion and its concomitant virtues were excluded from public life, the moral health of the country would deteriorate.

This model is commonly associated with traditional, conservative religion. Christian members of the former Moral Majority or the current “religious right” easily come to mind, as do those who would like to see a constitutional amendment declaring the U.S. a “Judeo-Christian” nation. Religion in public is not a novel development in U.S. history. But the shape of the current debate about religion in public *is* something new. This debate has been inspired, in large part, by the emergence of variously organized, politically active conservative Christians, especially by what is commonly known as the religious right—a loose alliance between a variety of conservative religious groups and the Republican Party.

Although “the” religious right was to some extent fostered by Republican Party officials who sought to create a large conservative voting block, this alliance is often unstable, and the religious right is not a monolithic group. Still, in spite of its instability as an organized movement, it seems to many to pose the threat of theocracy in America. When it advocates religion over the public landscape, this usually means employing the apparatus of the state to support and protect so-called “conservative Christian values,” such as heterosexual marriage, school prayer, and “pro-life” (anti-abortion) legislation. Moreover, “Christian values” have often been expanded to include such conservative ideals as “free” markets, minimal government, low taxes, and an aggressive stance on the “war on terror.” The religious right in America is convinced that if Christian values fail to inform politics, then America will decline as a nation morally, economically, and militarily.

Forms of politically progressive religion also belong to this model, *Religion Over the Public Landscape*. Some argue that a robust democracy in the U.S. relies on the beliefs and practices of progressive forms of Christianity, Judaism, and now Islam. It is not uncommon to hear political progressives arguing that peace, freedom, and justice require the kind of moral vision that accompanies the religion of such figures as Abraham Lincoln, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, Martin Buber, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If we fail to tap the religious impulse that nourishes and inspires the human spirit, then we as a nation will be less likely to achieve such significant goals as securing human rights, protecting the marginalized, or protecting the environment. In sum, progressive politics unaided by religion is bereft of the resources necessary to generate significant moral community, meaning, and action (see, for example, Robert Booth Fowler, pp. 157-59).

So while the political left fears that the religious right will unduly influence politics and the judiciary according to conservative religious values, many of these progressives hold religious beliefs—beliefs that often inform many of their public, political positions. For example, the following appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

As you may already know, one of America’s two political parties is extremely religious. Sixty-one percent of this party’s voters say they pray daily or more often. An astounding 92 percent of them believe in life after death. And there’s a hardcore subgroup in this party of super-religious Christian zealots . . . half of the members of this subgroup believe Bush uses too little religious rhetoric (Waldman, p. 106).

The political party?—*the Democrats*. The subgroup?—*African-American Democrats*. Like Republicans, Democrats are diverse, and many are religious. Some believe that religion is essential for the health of the republic.

The positions ascribed to this model usefully acknowledge the moral significance of religiosity in America’s past and present, and they do not attempt to relegate religion to the private realm, but rather invite it into the public and political landscapes. Yet their placement of religion *over* the public is problematic, *over* meaning the insistence that the U.S. can reach its most profound moral and political goals *only if* religion *watches over it*— guides and protects it—providing its vast, unique, and indispensable moral resources.

There are compelling moral and social considerations that may persuade *religious believers* to reject this model. It is one thing for an individual or community to bring a religious perspective to bear on a current public topic, such as the war in Iraq. It is another thing to make the global claim that the nation requires religion, implying that fellow citizens

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who are not religious do not have access to the most important moral resource. Religious traditions, for contingent and historical reasons, offer rich and often distinctive moral resources for public, national debate. They do not, however, have a monopoly on essential moral resources. In sum, insofar as this model implies that the most important moral lessons come exclusively from religious traditions—usually from the traditions of the religious majority—and insofar as it suggests that nonreligious citizens lack significant, perhaps essential, moral wherewithal, the model cannot provide a satisfactory, normative account of the role of religion in the public life of the nation.

Unfortunately, this model is least likely to convince those considered to be the most dangerous supporters of this model, namely, the religious right who believe that the U.S. should be a Christian nation and who advocate practices that—at least implicitly—resemble a theocracy.

### 2) Religion Banned from the Public Landscape

The second model is called *Religion Banned from the Public Landscape*. According to this model, religion should be kept out of the political and even much of the public life in the U.S. This model usually assumes that religion is contentious and divisive unless it is *rendered safe by being consigned to the private sphere*—the sphere of the voluntary association, the family, or the individual. It must not be brought into the larger public or political spheres because its partisan nature has great potential to foment conflict and to subject political authority to religious authority.

As already mentioned above, this model is commonly found among such political theorists as “Rawlsian liberals.” This is a complex issue and it is not easy to summarize the stances of those called “Rawlsian liberals.” Some, like John Rawls himself in his last publications, wish to prohibit the exchange of arguments based on religion only when addressing “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice” (John Rawls, p. 215). Here religion is banned only from a segment of the political realm. Those like Richard Rorty, in contrast, would like to see religion consigned to the private life and removed from the nation’s political life and much of its public life (See Richard Rorty, 1999, p. 169).

Rorty champions what he calls the “happy, Jeffersonian compromise” between the heirs of the Enlightenment and the religious” (Rorty, 1999, p. 169). Under its terms, the religious may keep their religious belief, but only on the condition that they are willing to privatize their belief. Ponder this compromise for a little while and it soon becomes clear that it is offering the following: *You may hold all the religious beliefs you want so long as they remain irrelevant to, or at least silent on, many things that matter most, for example, to public discussion and policy on the environment, energy, war, and social services.*

Rorty offers various justifications for this restrictive position on religion in public and political debate. For example, he claims that “the main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper” (Rorty, 1999, p. 171). By conversation-stopper, Rorty has in mind a person making a statement to which others have *no* response, presumably because the interlocutors have different worldviews.

Now, we may for good reason want public interlocutors to exhibit a wide range of virtues, including attentiveness, discretion, and sensitivity to audience, as well as courage, honesty, and judgment (for a discussion on democratic virtues in public speech, see Stout, pp. 85-86). But these virtues and their corresponding vices do not necessarily run along religious versus nonreligious lines. Moreover, we cannot enforce such virtues, especially by stating in advance that all reference to religion be excluded. Rorty could have better advanced his aims by describing in detail the kind and quality of conversation he would like to see on public issues rather than by attempting to rally “we atheists” to “enforce Jefferson’s compromise” (Rorty, 1999, p. 169).

When Rorty argues that religion should be kept private, this means, among other things, that churches, synagogues, and mosques should not educate their members about public or political issues (Rorty, 2003, p.148). Rather, religion should restrict itself to helping “individuals find meaning in their lives” and to serving “as a help to individuals in their

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times of trouble” (Rorty, 2003, p. 142).

It is not at all clear, however, how religious communities could assist individuals with issues of meaning or in times of trouble while, at the same time, systematically avoiding public and political issues. Are religious communities to be mute on such issues as war, social security, and environmental policies? May not such issues connect profoundly with issues of meaning and be especially relevant during times of trouble? And are religious leaders and lay members, when addressing such significant issues, expected to refrain from appealing to various forms of religious authority, such as scripture, tradition, or individual exemplars? Presumably, religious organizations—like such non-religious organizations as environmental, literary, or veteran groups—will on occasion articulate public and political stances, and in the process they will appeal to various forms of (what they consider to be) authoritative texts, reasons, ideals, and traditions to justify their stances.

Early in his career, Rawls seemed to share Rorty’s wish that religion stay out of public life. But later, in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls prohibits the public exchange of religious arguments only when addressing “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice.” Nonetheless, in either the more or less restrictive case, citizens whose outlooks are informed by religion are still required to refrain from making reference to this profound aspect of their identity when engaging in significant political deliberation and debate.

This Rawlsian restriction on religious arguments problematic for the following reasons:

- *Psychologically*, people cannot so neatly uncouple aspects of their identity.
- *Politically*, we do not want some citizens to repress the *real* reasons that tacitly support the only kind of public expression of reasons that Rawls will permit (see Stout, p. 64).
- *Juridically*, we cannot draw a pragmatically useful and meaningful line between “questions of basic justice” and the other lesser, yet related issues that pertain to questions of justice and the nature and arrangement of our public institutions.
- Finally, *epistemologically*, what Rawls calls “public reason” cannot in fact be defended as “the reason of citizens,” that is, as an inclusive style of deliberation that can be said to be acceptable to all reasonable persons.

This epistemological doubt is intensified when Rawls, in the “Introduction to the Paperback Edition” of *Political Liberalism*, permits comprehensive religious doctrines to enter into public reason, provided that “in due course public reasons . . . are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support” (Rawls, pp. li-iii). The new concession is essentially offering this: *An argument wearing the cloth of religion may be permitted provided that at some point the religious vestments are removed, thus allowing public reason to appear nakedly.* The only religious argument that can be permitted and trusted, then, is one that could initially have been stated in other terms, namely, in the terms of public reason. Yet this very idea of perfect translation between “non-public, religious reason” and “public reason” is precisely what gives pause.

The noble Enlightenment hope in public reason should be reformulated, not as Rawls’s hope in public reason trumping nonpublic reason, but as a democratic hope in a lively, rough-and-tumble political process of free and open exchange. This process of exchange—this alternative view of “public reasoning,” namely, the *public* (citizens) *reasoning* with each other—is not limited in advance by what all “might reasonably be expected to reasonably endorse” (Rawls, p. l). Rather, this process acknowledges that what is reasonable to endorse is itself debatable, and that some voices in the debate will not always be deemed reasonable by others in the debate. This unkempt process, in my view, goes to the heart of a democracy that honors diversity, equality, and liberty of conscience. The test of the democratic process is not, ultimately, that it produce “the reasonable,” as Rawls understands it, but rather that it foster an inclusive and open exchange on matters of public significance.

In spite of arguments opposing this model, it will remain tempting to many. By tempting, I mean that many of us have an intuitive sense that while there are some religions whose public presence seems benign or even beneficial, others seem threatening and dangerous. Moreover, we are aware of how imperfect our knowledge is about the two camps, safe religion and dangerous religion, and we know about the potential for a safe religion to become dangerous. For

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these reasons, the simplest and most effective strategy seems to be to pursue a form of aggressive laïcité and thereby keep all religion out of the political life.

As claimed above, this model is a temptation that should be resisted. Its exclusion of religion would require liberalism to pursue illiberal means. Furthermore, for psychological, political, juridical, and epistemological reasons, this model is not prudent, and even if it were, it is probably not achievable. Liberal approaches to religion often assume that religion can be easily privatized because, it is held, true religion is inward, spiritualized religion. But as historians and religious studies scholars understand, lived religion seldom runs along facile public/private lines.

### 3) *Public Landscape as Religious Space*

According to this model, the health of a republic depends on a pervasive, shared civil religion. The paradigmatic case for this model is Rousseau's civil religion, namely, an explicit profession of faith that declares sacred the legitimate laws of the land. No one is prolifically advocating this model in its most pristine form, and I have my doubts whether even Rousseau ever meant for us to take Rousseauian civil religion literally. Proposing civil religion may have been his way of reminding his generation—and now ours—of the indispensability of some shared beliefs and practices for a vibrant, democratic republic, especially if that republic counts tolerance as one of its chief virtues. A republic that places a premium on tolerance, and hence diversity, must be attentive to building a culture and shared perspectives that support diversity, democratic law, and democratic principles.

Now, if civil religion is understood not as an *explicit* profession of faith, but rather as an *implicit* set of shared civic beliefs, practices, and symbols, then *Public Landscape as Religious Space* becomes a recognizable position. In the U.S., for example, no state agency declared the Lincoln Memorial or the Bill of Rights as a sacred site or symbol. These became sacred (in a Durkheimian sense) as they accrued public significance and figured importantly in the public formation of moral identities and orientations. Such symbols, principles, or monuments can be said, then, to contribute to an *implicit* civil religion—or *set* of civil religions.

This model directly pertains to our reflection on the place of religion in public. If the model has any plausibility at all, then it suggests that religion, as understood here in a Durkheimian fashion, will *always* have a place in the public and political landscapes. This model brings a specific and useful complexity to the topic of religion and the public life. Those for and those against religion in public life often speak of religion as a clearly defined set of beliefs and practices. Boundaries between the secular and the religious seem plain and unambiguous. A merit of this model is its refusal to accept this borderline. *Secular religion*, while an awkward expression, is not an oxymoron in this model.

Moreover, the model can easily acknowledge the various and often alloyed religious expressions made in public. It can, for example, account for how Martin Luther King, Jr. could seamlessly evoke the sacredness of human rights, civil religion, and the dignity of all humans as made in the image of God, traditional theology, within the same sentence. This model then, would not only lead us to question facile, hard-and-fast distinctions between “secular” and “religious” and between “public” and “private,” but it would also bring attention to different *types* of religious expression in public.

Yet the model is not without its problems. *Conceptually*, it relies on a broad definition of religion, so broad that almost any significant public symbol, ritual, or principle could be considered religious. *Politically*, a different set of problems arises if one does allow the plausibility of the model. While some see civil religion as contributing to a form of healthy, national moral solidarity and declare it compatible with a wide variety of religious traditions; others fear that it contributes to a form of national idolatry or that it sanctions, by sanctifying, nationalistic ideologies and aspirations. More will be said below about this political worry in its extreme form, namely, the worry about the relation between civil religion and anti-democratic totalitarian, fascist, and theocratic regimes. For now, the conceptual and theoretical usefulness of the model will be noted as well as its political compatibility with democracy.

Conceptually, the model, in spite of its broad definition of religion, can do helpful work in the hands of scholars. It can

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generate valuable accounts of various social, public institutions that—in form and function—resemble what we often associate with religion. On the separate and different issue of civil religion and nationalism, civil religion in the U.S. is not a homogeneous set of symbols and doctrines, but is rather an assorted collection of conflicting elements subject to multiple interpretations and serving multiple purposes. It is sometimes helpful to think of *various* civil religions operating within the same society. For purposes here, this model adds some useful complexity to an otherwise simplistic discussion of the nature of religion in modernity and, more specifically, of religion in the public life of democratic societies.

Patrick Deneen has recently mounted a spirited critique of what he represents as the democratic, civil religion tradition. He claims that “a lineage of thinkers combining forms of ‘civil religion’ to democracy can be traced from Protagoras and Machiavelli and Rousseau to thinkers such as Dewey with his promotion of a ‘common faith,’ Rorty’s ‘romance’ and ‘strong poetry,’ and the ‘political theology of Williams and Eisenach’” (Deneen, p. 83). According to Deneen, this tradition or lineage attempts to use civil religion as a means to transform humans from disparate, belligerent individuals into cooperative, democratic citizens: “this ‘religiously’ infused form of democracy is seen as the best source of achieving widespread civic ‘mutual respect’ lauded by Gutmann and Thompson, on the one hand, and ‘enlarged mentality’ recommended by Arendt, on the other” (Deneen, p. 51). One might well wonder, *what is so misguided about this attempt?*

Deneen’s thoughtful critique of the democratic, civil religion tradition springs from his book’s overall argument: when humans attempt to exceed their capacities, assuming divine-like powers and authority, they fail to acknowledge human depravity and limitation, and, in the process, they glorify the democratic state. Democratic, civil religion, in Deneen’s view, is a disguised religion that attempts to transform that which is limited and imperfect into something limitless and divine (see Deneen, p. 96). Elegantly summarizing his criticism of civil religion and its concomitant democratic faith, he states:

It is a faith with sources outside humanity that nevertheless affirms thoroughgoing faith *in* humanity. . . . It is a faith . . . that humanity should ultimately ascend to godlike status. It is . . . a politicized faith with divine sanction, a secular faith aimed at human transformation into democratized divinity itself (p. 83).

Some aspects of Deneen’s argument will be addressed below when *spiritual democracy* is developed. For now, it should not come as a surprise to scholars of religion, among others, that the language of shared belief, practice, and ideals is commonly employed, implicitly or explicitly, in order to name and to cultivate a moral solidarity among otherwise disparate humans who belong to the same political entity or social group (a city-state, a nation-state, or a transnational association, for example). The language and manner of moral solidarity often assumes what can be called the language and manner of religion.

Durkheim for example claimed that, “religion is the way of thinking characteristic of collective existence” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 312). Moreover, attempting to cultivate shared beliefs, practices, and ideals need not be, and has not always been, done in a promethean manner that exaggerates human powers and ignores human limits. In contrast to Deneen’s account of Rousseau, for example, my earlier investigation of his civil religion discloses Rousseau’s Augustinian sensibilities and the limits of political and, more generally, human achievements (see Cladis, pp. 209-13).

Finally, if the language of “transcendence” is occasionally found in what could be called “civil religion discourse,” scholars of religion can readily acknowledge that there are, in fact, tangible ways that aspects of our shared social life do transcend individual human agents. Without either deifying humans or reifying social forces, it can be reasonably claimed, as Durkheim once put it:

we speak a language we have not created; we invoke rights we have not instituted; each generation inherits a treasure trove of knowledge it did not amass itself. We owe these various benefits of civilization to society, and if we do not generally perceive their source, at least we know that they are not of our making (Durkheim, 2001, p. 159).

There is a way, then, in which it is natural and appropriate to recognize and esteem social, political, and moral



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traditions that contribute to our humanity. Civil religion need not entail alarming sanctification of nationalistic ideologies, democratic or otherwise. *If we stop considering Gemeinschaft as a thing of the past, as an anomaly in modernity, we may worry less about civil religion and its language of shared belief, practices, and ideals.* Therefore if the notion of civil religion brings attention to democracy as a tradition, and highlights its various and complicated relationship to religion, then the model is serving a useful purpose.

Yet what of civil religion wed to anti-democratic regimes? Some of the greatest horrors in history have been associated with totalitarian, fascist, and theocratic manifestations of civil religion. This is especially true of totalitarianism and fascism in the twentieth century, and many of the chapters in Deneen's book provide detailed, historical accounts of these dangerous political movements. As a supplement to this excellent historical work, it is worth considering in a more abstract fashion the very concept of *political religion*. What, exactly, is meant by political religion? What is *religious* about it? This theoretical inquiry, it is hoped, will develop the conceptual tools to distinguish between dangerous and beneficial civil religion.

When asking such fundamental questions, the work of Emilio Gentile is probably the best place to start. He was an early pioneer in the work on political religion, and he continues to provide intellectual leadership in this area of study. Gentile distinguishes between civil religion and political religion, and he places both under the broad heading of the "sacralization of politics" (Gentile, pp. xiv-xix). He defines it as, "a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity" (Gentile, p. xiv). That supreme entity is a political entity, for as Gentile claims, the sacralization of politics is a development in modernity, and it reflects:

the affirmation of the primacy of the sovereignty of the state, secularization of culture, the loss of the church's spiritual hegemony in relation to the state and society, the subsequent separation of the church and state, the triumph of the principle of the people's sovereignty and the creation of mass politics (p. xv).

Before examining Gentile's distinction between civil and political religion, it is worth pausing here to note the operative assumptions about religion. Notice that the sacralization of politics assumes a form of secularization. Indeed, the "secularization of culture, the loss of the church's spiritual hegemony in relation to the state and society, [and] the subsequent separation of the church and state" are built into the very conditions of the sacralization of politics. Yet we might well wonder, *is secularization a necessary condition for the sacralization of politics?* And even if it were, we would need more clarity on the key terms: What does the "secularization of culture" entail? Declining attendance at religious services? Declining public references to religion? Declining relevance of religion to the various spheres of one's life? And what does "the loss of the church's spiritual hegemony in relation to the state and society" entail? What is a *spiritual* hegemony? When did the church have hegemony in relation to the state and society? Which church? Which state and society? And finally, what does "the separation of the church and state" entail? A legal separation? A cultural one?

These mostly rhetorical questions expose assumptions that run through much of Gentile's work on political religion. First, there is frequently the assumption that religion is an essential, monolithic force that seeks to monopolize all aspects of one's life. Next, there is the assumption, rooted in the work of Mircea Eliade, that this all-consuming, tenacious religion *must* express itself in some fashion. If its expression declines via traditional religion, then it will express itself somewhere else, and for Gentile, that somewhere else is in the political (Gentile, pp. 13-15). So, there is a *perennial* view of religion (religion will always exist) wed to a secularization theory (traditional religion will decline), resulting in the view that the inevitable death of traditional religion will lead to its inevitable rebirth in political religion.

Current scholarship in religion, however, questions these assumptions: not all religion seeks to monopolize the entirety of the individual's life; secularization theories have proved to be quite unreliable; and the perennial view of religion is more of a theological commitment than a sociological observation. If Gentile wants to continue to include "American civil religion" in the broad category of the "sacralization of politics," then he needs to refine or abandon secularization as one of the central conditions of sacralization of politics. Religiosity has been robust in the U.S. since its founding, and some historians claim that it has increased—not declined—during the last two hundred

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years. Gentile's purposes, then, would be better served if he did not link the "sacralization of politics" to secularization.

Let's now turn to the Gentile's formal definition of the sacralization of politics. The first part of the definition is a relatively straightforward Durkheimian account of religion as, "a *system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence.*" But in the second part, namely, the *subordination of "the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity,"* a new element is added: *subordination* becomes a key aspect of the sacralization of politics. And note that "the meaning and end of human existence" is *generated* by such subordination (and is not merely *related to* subordination). Presumably, then, in the absence of meaning generated by subordination, we do not have a case of the sacralization of politics. Yet this will prove troubling when we turn to Gentile's definition of civil religion.

Gentile claims, "*civil religions and political religions* represent the two main phenomena of sacralization of politics produced by modern society" (Gentile, p. xv). He then provides detailed definitions of each, which are worth quoting in full:

*Civil religion* is the conceptual category that contains the forms of sacralization of a political system that guarantee a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their governments through peaceful and constitutional methods. Civil religion therefore respects individual freedom, coexists with other ideologies, and does not impose obligatory and unconditional support for its commandments. *Political religion* is the sacralization of a political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments. Consequently, a political religion is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual's life and of a society's collective life (p. xv).

It is puzzling to claim that civil religion is one of the main forms of the sacralization of politics, which entails radical *subordination*, but then to go on and claim that civil religion "respects individual freedom, coexists with other ideologies, and does not impose obligatory and unconditional support for its commandments." Moreover, it is not clear to me that, in the end, it is useful to define civil religion in *normatively positive terms* (for example, the plurality of ideas, distribution of power, and the lawful ability to dismiss government) while describing political religion in *normatively negative terms* (for example, absolute power, ideological monism, and the unconditional subordination of the individual).

A more powerful and flexible conceptual approach would give a neutral, sociological definition of civil religion and then go on to offer normative accounts of various *types* of civil religion based on their central ideals, beliefs, practices, myths, and symbols. With this approach, political religion (as Gentile defines it) would become a species of civil religion. Yet the usefulness of the term *political religion* to indicate normatively dangerous types of civil religion must be questioned. It would be preferable to use more specific names when indicating different types of civil religion, for example, *fascist civil religion*, *Nazi civil religion*, *American democratic civil religion*, *French democratic civil religion*, and so on. The problem with the term *political religion* is that it carries the implication that *if we can describe a political entity with the categories of religion, then it is necessarily suspect*. In fact, however, it is neither surprising nor disturbing to find that we can describe political entities with the categories of religion, if we are using something like a Durkheimian approach to religion.

It is important that we be able to name, in fairly precise terms, what *is* problematic or disturbing with some forms of civil religion. And Gentile, perhaps more than anyone else, has helped us with this task. In his definition of political religion, for example, he identifies an "unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments." Civil religions with these characteristics ought to alarm us. But again, it would be more useful to drop the vague term *political religion* and employ more specific designations, such as fascist civil religion. If we find that we do need a broader category to capture the various normatively problematic forms of civil religion, we could use the term *antidemocratic civil religion*.

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The key terms that Gentile employs are either too vague or carry too many contestable assumptions to do useful work. Also, as mentioned earlier, there is often the unspoken assumption that the liberal state is the normative political order. Hence, if a political entity makes strong claims on the lives of its citizens, if it generates “myths” about its origin or its future, or if it offers significant meaning that animates the lives of its citizens, then it becomes *suspiciously* religious.

But one could imagine an Aristotelian virtue theorist or an Alasdair MacIntyre communitarian arguing that a coherent, just state would, among other things, cultivate among its citizens shared understandings and perspectives, make substantive demands of its citizens (in the form of moral obligations), and would perhaps even propagate central “myths”—that is, narratives—that attempt to describe and inculcate the *character* of the nation. It is not objectionable to claim that such characteristics of a state could be described as religious (in a Durkheimian sense); but it is objectionable to claim that such communitarian characteristics are dangerous or suspicious *because* they resemble religion and are therefore deemed irrational or destructive when brought into the political order.

“Myth” might seem like an obvious, religious candidate for being a dangerous characteristic of a political entity. But myth *per se* is not dangerous; what is potentially dangerous is the *content* of the myth. Take, for example, the two mythic Western narratives that Michael Walzer has called “exodus” and “messianic” politics. Those who subscribe to the story or myth of “exodus politics” are taught to be committed to a politics of continual reform (“a long series of decisions, backslidings, and reforms”). Exodus politics underscores epistemological and political limits, making one aware of the contingency and uncertainty of our knowledge and beliefs. By way of the stories and figures associated with exodus politics, we learn that there are no final solutions, and we become distrustful of exodus politics’ opposite, namely, “messianic politics”—a politics of absolutized revolutions and once-and-for-all solutions (Walzer, pp. 16, 135-141, and 144-149).

If a political entity can be described as having the *form* of religion (that is, the sociological characteristics of religion) we should not necessarily become alarmed. It is the *content* (the specific beliefs, ideals, myths, and practices) of the civil religion that may or may not be alarming from a normative point of view.

In sum, in the hands of scholars, the third model, *Public Landscape as Religious Space*, remains helpful as a conceptual tool. Asking questions about civil religion leads us to ask questions about the nature of religion, about its various social constructions, and about the social constructions of its (supposed) opposites, “the secular” and “the civil.” This line of questioning, in turn, inevitably leads us to think critically about “the public sphere” and about that “modern era” against which religion is (supposedly) battling. Moreover, the model suggests that religion as a concept is flexible, perhaps a term that can be applied as easily to gods as to social or civil entities. When the concept *religion* can be suitably applied to illuminate a nation’s civic life, such suitability in and of itself should not imply that vicious nationalism is at play. Rather, the content of the civil religion needs to be carefully evaluated.

### 4) *Public Landscape as Varied Topography*

As the absence of the word *religion* from the title suggests, in this model religion is not initially treated as a special case. This may sound like a dodge: address the issue of *religion* in *public* by eliminating the first of the two terms. But at least as a starting point, this model begins by treating religion (as traditionally understood) just like any other more or less comprehensive worldview, such as Marxism, American pragmatism, secular humanism, or hedonism. In this model, one does not decide in advance who may speak or what kind of arguments one may offer in public and political debate—even debate on “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice.” In this model, all voices are initially welcome. Moreover, a working assumption in this model is that the voices will usually vary in form and content. Some voices may be explicitly religious; others may be explicitly non-religious. But these distinctions do not matter, according to this model, because no voice is treated as a special case. Or, to say the same thing differently, liberty of conscience and freedom of speech deem that *each voice* is a special case worthy of a hearing.

This model makes no predictions about whether allowing a varied public topography is likely to produce more conflict

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or more harmony. In some instances it may lead to divisiveness, in others to accord. But in any case, harmony, often a worthy aim, is not usually the most salient issue. More salient is attention to open and inclusive conversation, debate, and participation in democratic institutions.

Now, after having noted in what ways religion should not be treated as a special case, this model goes on to acknowledge that, in some sense, religion *is* a special subject (in light of particular socio-historical circumstances). Given the legacy of religion in the U.S., which includes religious persecutions on the one hand and religious revivals on the other, Americans as a people tend to be both religious and wary of religion. There are highly charged issues that pertain to religion in the U.S. that would not merit consideration in other societies. These are different societies, with different histories, and different concerns. In U.S. society, if a belief or practice is associated with religion that may be enough for it to become controversial if it enters the public space of government or education. This is, in part, because we have learned some lessons of caution from our history of religion.

Adherents to each of the proposed models wrestle in one way or another with the issue of *religion and conflict*. Some appeal to a civil religion in the hope that it will bring national unity (the third model); others appeal to a neutral or “secular” public space in the hope that it will render religion private and thereby safe for democracy (the second model); and still others appeal to religion as a widely-held treasury of virtue that, if not thwarted by government or other secular forces, will fund the country with morality and unity (the first model). And while each model has its merits, each also tends to make doubtful assumptions about how to defuse possible conflict associated with religion: model three (in some versions) assumes the existence of a pervasive and comprehensive national civil religion; model two assumes the viability of stripping away citizens’ religious identities in public and political debate; and model one assumes traditional religion in the U.S., if given a free reign, will assure the moral flourishing of the nation.

While the fourth model certainly does not seek to introduce unnecessary conflict and wishes to contribute to accord where needful, it nonetheless focuses more on honoring the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution than on the reduction of social discord. It seeks to uphold both the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment: to prohibit government from officially sponsoring religion and to guarantee the free exercise of religion. The model allows religious voices in public and political debate while disallowing state funding and action to promote or disadvantage any particular religion.

Again, reduction of conflict is not the chief goal of model four. Still, acknowledging and honoring our differences in public and political arenas may indeed lead to a more cooperative society. Welcoming the many and varied voices is not only the right thing to do—legally and morally—but it may also be the most strategic way to draw on a powerful yet still latent source of strength in pluralistic democratic societies—the vitality of their diversity.

This model, remember, is being recommended for the U.S. and, by extension with suitable adjustments, to other pluralistic, democratic societies. Yet even for this limited though significant group of political entities, this favored model poses some risks. Freedom of religion and freedom of expression—two cardinal rights in democracies—entitle individuals and communities to bring religious convictions to their political stances. Democracies need to be able to accommodate religious diversity—as well as other forms of diversity—in the public and political spheres, in spite of potential conflict. Yet a religious majority could threaten the very democratic institutions and culture that enabled it to gain prominence and power. A society can protect itself to a large degree from such religious dominance if it is equipped with sufficient constitutional (or other legal) safeguards that are supported by a robust democratic culture. But there are no guarantees that the legal safeguards and the culture supporting them will hold or will not at least experience moral “lapses.”

In the U.S., even after the election of President Obama, there remains a potentially dangerous alliance between a “conservative” form of Christianity and a reactionary form of politics and civil religion. Yet in spite of this threat, religion must be permitted its public and political voice. I realize this leaves us with few options. Reactionary religions that seek to dominate—like all reactionary movements that attempt to dominate—pose threats to democracies. Yet unless we are willing to curtail the rights of citizens and place restraints on an otherwise free and open society, we must live with the threat of reactionary religion, acknowledging it and seeking to challenge it by democratic means.

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The challenges and threats posed by a reactionary, traditional religion wed to civil religion are as great as those posed by any other antidemocratic civil religion. Hence it is important that the good work on what is commonly called “political religion”—that is, “secular” political entities that become sacralized—include investigations on theocracies and other forms of traditional religions that pose dangers to democracies and, more broadly, to human rights. For democratic societies, one of the best safeguards against antidemocratic religion—whether traditional, civil, or some combination of the two—is to cultivate continuously a robust democratic culture. What will be described immediately below as *spiritual democracy* is an example of such a robust, cultural safeguard.

### III. Protection From Antidemocratic Religion: The Case for Spiritual Democracy

It is important to note, however, that *spiritual democracy is not identical to Public Landscape as Varied Topography*. It is one among many possible stances within the model. Spiritual democracy is a distinctively progressive political stance that recognizes the need to be attentive to the cultural as well as to the legal aspects of a democracy. In contrast to this particular stance, the general model is inclusive of both progressive and conservative stances. Spiritual democracy, in turn, acknowledges the legitimate inclusiveness of the fourth model and is happy to work within it.

*Spiritual democracy* refers to a democracy that is not exclusively or primarily understood as a set of democratic procedures or legal codes. It is not bereft of procedural justice, legal codes, or of such democratic principles as “one person, one vote.” But its scope is not limited to elections and procedures, for it includes the manners and character of a nation and its diverse citizens. Spiritual democracy, then, refers to a society’s democratic culture and laws, its ideals and institutions, its critical reflection and Constitution, working together to enhance each other. As noted earlier, *spiritual democracy* is neither a mystical, nationalistic political body nor a democracy based on supposed transcendent or immutable ideals. The term *spiritual* captures the various socio-cultural aspects of a robust democracy, embracing the nation’s character, its citizens’ diverse identities, and a distinctively democratic relation between the two. In spite of my attempt to restrict the meaning of the term, *spiritual*, it may still be misunderstood. Why persist, then? Why not substitute, say, *substantive* for *spiritual*? I want to appropriate the term *spiritual* insofar as it connotes a reflective integration of mind, skills, practices, dispositions, and emotions.

For some time now, I have been interested in models and defenses of democratic institutions that do not rely exclusively on either appeals to rational choice or market efficiency models—often purportedly derived from principles of universal, deliberative human rationality—or political arguments based on natural reason or any other anchors in a transcendent, unhistorical moral reality. My interest, rather, is in exploring models that describe democratic society as a social, cultural achievement and recognize that its protection and development entail attention to its social, cultural basis.

When we acknowledge the socio-historical nature of such democratic achievements as human rights, rule of law, consent of the people, and celebration of diversity, we acknowledge the fragility of these achievements. These achievements are not written and secured in a foundation of transcendent stone. *Socio-cultural forces erected them and can just as easily bring them down*. Even the most basic political achievements cannot be taken for granted. This should make us vigilant, especially if we hold that there are some things that no one, anywhere, at any time, should need to worry about happening to them.

This stance, which is stated most powerfully by Judith Shklar, plays a profound, normative role in the case for spiritual democracy (see Shklar). And, alas, this stance will always be timely. For example, it was once assumed that the United States had unequivocally forsworn the use of torture and was a world leader in efforts to eradicate torture everywhere. However, torture made a comeback, despite laws that prohibit it. So did spying on U.S. citizens and imprisoning them without charges brought against them and without access to legal counsel. These are examples of moral “lapses” (or at least I hope that, in years from now, they will be seen as lapses and not as the new and morally impoverished status quo). In the absence of a socio-cultural base to support just laws, laws can be interpreted,

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amended, or ignored in unjust ways. This is exactly what Rousseau had in mind when he claimed that the law alone cannot bring justice. If a society—its beliefs and practices, traditions and cultures—does not support a normative principle, or supports it ambivalently, the principle is vulnerable.

To bring attention to the socio-cultural nature of democratic beliefs, practices, and institutions, then, is to bring warning but also hope. For that which has been made can also be remade, enhanced, and fortified. By acknowledging socio-historical, liberal forms of life that support democratic institutions, we can purposefully attend to and cultivate this dynamic material—socially embedded beliefs and practices, ideals, and customs—in order to strengthen and further such achievements as human rights and social justice. Such attention to and cultivation of *spiritual democracy* will serve as a form of *protection from antidemocratic religion*.

It is not a venture in discovering a single, national moral identity, and then working to sustain it. No such monolithic identity exists in the U.S. or in other North Atlantic, liberal democracies. Even if one did exist, we as citizens would want to question it, explore it, evaluate it, reform it, and not simply reproduce it. Rather, this project—the case for the cultivation of a spiritual democracy—is a venture in recognizing the ways democratic beliefs, practices, and institutions are embedded in socio-cultural ways of life and in how that recognition can assist us in strengthening and extending a robust, progressive democracy.

Many figures could fit into a genealogy of a progressive, American spiritual democracy. Walt Whitman, who wrote of “a sublime and serious Religious Democracy,” could be interpreted as belonging to it (Whitman, p. 977). In many ways, he is Rousseau’s American counterpart. Both Rousseau and Whitman articulated a democracy that pertained to the manners and traditions of a people and not only to formal institutional arrangements. Both Rousseau and Whitman emphasized the necessity of a strong public commitment to shared democratic projects, the protection of private pursuits, and the need to relate the public and private without conflating them. Both argued for the cultivation of a vital, shared sense of democratic public identity, on the one hand, and a vibrant, commodious interiority that animates private lives, on the other. Finally, both customarily celebrated the public and private hopes, achievements, and victories of the common person under ordinary, daily circumstances rather than the extraordinary deeds of the powerful individual or eccentric genius. For these reasons, among others, we can think of Whitman as Rousseau’s spiritual heir in North America, promulgating a spiritual democracy.

Now, by *spiritual democracy* I do not mean to suggest that a pluralistic society such as our own does not contain multiple socio-linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups that contribute importantly to the complex identity of individuals and to the complex identity of the nation. It is not to suggest, then, that a person’s or the nation’s identity is simple, homogeneous, or fixed. It is to suggest that our rich identities, fed by diverse streams, can also be fed by shared visions of who we can become as a people, a people who are capable of bringing diverse backgrounds and perspectives to enrich the most admirable democratic stories that we know and tell. Fostering public visions that can link our diverse lives in significant, shared projects—this is a goal worthy of our consideration.

### IV. Conclusion: The Twin Gods in Modernity

My championing spiritual democracy or what could be called a *common democratic faith* makes me a likely candidate for Deneen’s list of the dangerous democratic faithful. By bringing attention to human malleability and the potential for the cultivation of democratic habits and virtues, it may seem that I have unwarranted faith in unlimited human transformation and perfection. It may seem that I have failed to learn what Deneen considers to be one of religion’s (or at least, Augustinian religion’s) most valuable lessons: the pervasiveness of human fragility, vulnerability, and limits.

It is not clear, however, that belief in indeterminate human transformation necessarily entails the belief that godlike perfection is achievable. Pace Deneen, to hold the view that humans can engage in on-going transformation need not entail naïve perfectionism or a dangerous optimism that ignores the long record of human fallibility and moral

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failures. Indeed, what is called spiritual democracy acknowledges human finitude, cautions us about the fragility of our achievements, and, while reminding us of our responsibility to improve our society, warns us that such improvement will always be marred, will never be sufficient, and that humility is required even concerning our greatest successes—because our achievements are always only ambiguously good, never entirely good.

The *form* of spiritual democracy may still give pause to many. By *form*, I mean a pervasive culture or civil religion that is equipped with a (dynamic) set of ideals, beliefs, practices, symbols, and historical narratives or myths. This form will conjure for many the hazards of totalitarianism and its civil religion. This response, however, is largely because we tend to be suspicious of all forms of *Gemeinschaft* (robust tradition and community) in modernity. As noted earlier, if we stop consigning *Gemeinschaft* to the past, stop viewing it as an anomaly in modernity, we may worry less about civil religion *per se* and its manner of shared beliefs, practices, and ideals. Our suspicion of *Gemeinschaft* is connected to our assumption that liberal, minimal forms of government are the norm.

Yet it is precisely a minimal government, in conjunction with a lethargic culture that renders populations vulnerable to totalitarianism and antidemocratic civil religion. There is a possible connection—sociologically and psychologically—between radical individualism and the rise of authoritarianism. Without public associations, symbols, ideals, and clusters of meaning, the private life can become hollow and solipsistic, and from this position the individual can become *indifferent* to the political or *desperate* for significance and purpose. Either way, this condition is dangerous insofar as individuals, unanchored to democratic social traditions and symbols, can be swept up by transient crazes and dangerous ideologies, unwittingly placing absolute power in the hands of those not worthy of it, or insofar as apathetic citizens can ignore dangerous developments until it becomes too late.

There are ways, then, in which I am both *more and less* alarmed than Gentile about religion in modernity. I am *less* worried about the very idea of religion today in public and political spheres. In my view, religion and politics is not necessarily a dangerous or “unnatural” combination in modernity. Yet there are also ways in which I am *more* alarmed than Gentile about religion in modernity. Gentile claims that:

At the beginning of the third millennium, the sacralization of politics appears everywhere to be in retreat. Totalitarian religions have been destroyed, rejected, or at the very least abandoned. Even in democratic regimes . . . the sacralization of politics appears to be restricted to a residual and prosaic ceremonial involving government and the governed in homage to fading beliefs and myths that have become a sham and are no longer relevant (pp. 145-46).

I am not as confident as Gentile that “the sacralization of politics appears everywhere to be in retreat” and that “in democratic regimes” it “appears to be restricted to a residual and prosaic ceremonial.” I worry about reactionary, traditional religions around the globe that are fostering a dangerous form of “the sacralization of politics”; I worry about the threat of theocracy in the U.S. and elsewhere; and finally, I worry about some forms of civil religion in the U.S. that seem far from “residual and prosaic ceremonial” but appear vigorous, nationalistic, and militaristic. One reason I distinguished *forms* of civil religion (democratic and antidemocratic) was to provide more clarity on the dangerous forms of civil religion. If I have spent much time on describing and championing spiritual democracy (a progressive, anti-totalitarian form of civil religion), it was so that we could have a counter-example to perilous, antidemocratic religion.

My worries and fears, I should make clear, are matched by my hope in what I earlier identified as two types of religion in public that liberalism does not need to fear: 1) diverse traditional religions, when suitably embedded in a democratic culture; and 2) democratic civil religion, when suitably defined. Indeed, there are powerful resources in traditional religions that can be employed to battle against ugly nationalism and militarism. And a democratic civil religion or common faith (such as spiritual democracy) can promote that which is most humane and lovely in a robust democratic society.

Religion—like other socio-cultural institutions equipped with powerful normative ideals, beliefs, and practices—is two-edged: it can do tremendous good or tremendous harm. It therefore deserves our attention, and the work on “political religion” is helping to garner that deserved attention. In spite of a century of secularization theory, religion does not appear to be going away any time soon. And to my mind, the presence of religion in modernity highlights

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the importance of wrestling with an on-going, central democratic challenge: namely, how to permit and respect—but not privilege—religious diversity in public space and in political deliberation.

Modern democracies have many lessons to learn from history about how various forms of religion, traditional and civil, can be treacherous. But the temptation to ban traditional religion from democratic politics will not ultimately serve democratic purposes. Nor will fearing a robust democratic common faith. The twin gods *will* intermingle. The challenge is to transform our fears into sources of hope.

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