



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago  
Loyola eCommons

---

Sociology: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department

---

7-2020

## Assuming Whiteness in Twentieth Century American Religion

Rhys Williams

Loyola University Chicago, [rwilliams7@luc.edu](mailto:rwilliams7@luc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/soc\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/soc_facpubs)



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, Rhys. Assuming Whiteness in Twentieth Century American Religion. Religion Is Raced: Understanding American Religion in the 21st Century, , : 74-92, 2020. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Sociology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
© NYU Press, 2020.

## Assuming Whiteness in Twentieth-Century American Religion

RHYS H. WILLIAMS

Just over fifty years ago, noted sociologist Robert Bellah published a now-classic essay, “Civil Religion in America” (1967). It kicked off a cascade of sociological analysis of religion in American public life and national identity, with the concept making its way into the vocabulary of the political punditry. Thirty years ago, the leading sociologist of religion of his era, Robert Wuthnow, published the enormously influential *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (1988), also an examination of religion in American public life. His analysis, somewhat amended, is generally accepted wisdom in sociology currently, and set the stage for much of the thinking about religious and political “polarization” in contemporary America. These two ideas—“civil religion” and “restructuring”—have been centrally influential concepts for understanding religion in American society over the past half-century.

There are ways in which the messages of those two important pieces are antithetical to each other—Bellah’s civil religion was understood as reaching across American social and religious divisions to provide a web of religious meanings that could unite Americans in a sense of nationhood. He posited a religion that sacralized the nation and was an expression of, and helped produce, national identity and social cohesion. In contrast, Wuthnow examined the changing nature of divisions within American religion, arguing that they had restructured, especially since the 1960s, from being along confessional lines (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, Jew) to being along a liberal/conservative axis that cut across affiliational categories—such that conservative Protestants have more in common with conservative Catholics than they do with liberal Protestants, for example. Included in Wuthnow’s analysis was a chapter on civil religion, in which Wuthnow described

a bifurcation of the religious meaning of national identity, again along this new divide. He titled that chapter “two cheers” for America and examined liberal and conservative civil religious ideologies.

What neither scholar engaged fundamentally was the extent to which American religion is raced. Bellah was concerned about the ways in which religious understandings could provide a basis for social unity for Americans, even as the country was divided by political and social events of the 1960s. But he did not recognize that what we call “racialized” social structures are so integral both to American history and to contemporary public life that they simply cannot be sidelined when thinking about religion in national identity. Wuthnow focused on the composition and causes of religious differences and how they were changing in the social dynamics of post–World War II society. But Wuthnow tells the story of White Christian America as if it is all of “American” religion and thus misses the ways in which race structures religio-political divisions. Issues involving race and ethno-racial differences appear in the work of both scholars (more in Bellah than Wuthnow). However, fundamentally, religion is not raced for either author—they stopped short of thinking of an intersectional reality where religious identities are tightly interwoven with racial identities, and they overly identified “American” religion with what White Americans were doing and believing.

However, if we keep religion and race in the picture together—and show their interdependencies in terms of sociopolitical dynamics—we get a different image of how American religion has functioned and changed in the last half-century. Whether understanding civil religion’s centrality to national identity and its deep entwining with the nation’s dominant narrative, or understanding how religion has changed and contributes to, or challenges, political and social differences, sociological approaches must more fully explore how religion and race are intertwined. This chapter will engage the concepts of civil religion and restructuring and will consider how their lack of attention to race has missed fuller understandings of race, religion, and American life.

### Civil Religion and Unity within Diversity

“Civil religion,” like many popular and useful sociological concepts, has a number of different definitions, all of which overlap, but often with

important distinctions or differences in their implications. In his 1967 essay, Bellah did not offer an explicit definition of the idea but called civil religion “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things” (1967:9) that focused on the American nation. Bellah’s student John A. Coleman (1970:70) defined civil religion as “the set of beliefs, rites, and symbols which relates a man’s [*sic*] role as citizen and his society’s place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning.” These approaches treat civil religion much like any confessional religion but say little directly about civil religion’s actual political content. However, the Bellah tradition assumed that civil religion was a source of social cohesion and unity in a modern nation, particularly one where the polity was formally secular (see Williams and Fuist 2014) and open to all citizens.

Much of the debate about civil religion’s political consequences discusses whether it is inherently conservative (i.e., a “priestly” elevation of the nation-state as sacred) or whether it can be a force for progressive social change—what could be called “prophetic” politics. Bellah was adamant about the prophetic potential of civil religion, and many of those following his conceptual lead, most notably sociologist Philip Gorski (2017), agree. One of the most important (and for Gorski, defining) things about civil religion is its capacity to be a force leading the nation to be better than it is. National self-worship, or religious nationalism, is not truly “civil religion” for Bellah and Gorski.

The debate on the political cast of civil religion has pushed to the background the fact that it is overwhelmingly understood to have cohesive and unifying properties. But a basic sociological characteristic of social and symbolic boundaries is that they exclude as well as include—any social identity that creates an in-group creates out-groups as well. The unifying properties of civil religion may well help create an American national identity, but they simultaneously, if often implicitly, put some social identities into an “other” category. And in US history and society, the major “other” categories have involved race. By contrast, fewer of those writing about civil religion have taken its exclusionary and divisive potential seriously, particularly regarding race (but see McRoberts in this volume; Phillips 2018; Reed et al. 2016; Williams 2013).

Bellah was not blind when thinking about race in American life. His writings on civil religion considered slavery as America’s “original sin”

and racial discrimination as a continuing stain on the nation's history. He envisioned the Civil War that ended slavery and the Civil Rights movement that challenged Jim Crow as "times of trial" for the nation (1975). Without saying so directly, Bellah basically elevated Abraham Lincoln to the premier position in the civil religious pantheon for his work preserving the nation while ending slavery and for his words of redemption and reconciliation toward the South after the war. Lincoln confronted racial injustice but overcame it to keep a reunited nation on the path to fulfilling its promise.

However, while Bellah saw racial inequality and racism as a stain on the nation's history, I think it fair to say he did not think it a permanent stain on the national character. It was not fundamental to the United States; it was a flaw in the nation, not a constitutive feature of it (see also Edwards 2016). Bellah saw in civil religion a tool for transcending racism and perhaps even race. That the promise of civil religion might be different, at a basic level, for people of color was not part of civil religion as Bellah imagined it, in large part because of Bellah's own commitments to its unifying and transcendent properties.

Bellah's understanding of civil religion as a unifying dimension of American public culture emerged from the French social theorist Emile Durkheim's assumption that all societies need some form of cultural glue that helps to form a moral community. Bellah wondered how that could work in the United States, a "new" nation with less rootedness in ethno-religious conceptions of peoplehood and having a formally secular state. In a society not only marked by religious diversity, but one that had also grown to self-consciously celebrate such diversity, that cultural glue could not come from confessional or sectarian faiths. Thus, Bellah considered the ways in which the nation's history, destiny, and identity were infused with sacred meaning, both by the nation's political leaders and by the American populace generally.

Bellah mostly thought of civil religion as a "creed" and found it articulated in public speeches and documents, primarily by national political leaders. Others, such as social anthropologist William Lloyd Warner (1959), focused on public rituals like Memorial Day. Still others in this tradition have centered their analyses on public monuments (e.g., Gardella 2014; Riley 2015), formal theologies or political philosophies (e.g., Atchinson et al. 2018; Beiner 2011), or nontextual symbols such

as flags (Marvin and Ingle 1999). But social unity is assumed to be civil religion's primary function.

For Bellah, civil religion had a prophetic content. That is, civil religion, rightly understood, transcends narrow partisan self-interest in domestic politics and national self-interest in global affairs, and points to a greater morality and social justice. Examples drawn from Presidents Lincoln and John Kennedy, or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., showed these leaders urging the nation to fulfill a sacred duty to pursue justice and more perfectly embody its destiny and identity as a good society. Bellah was clear that civil religion was not “national self-worship” (Richey and Jones 1974:15–16); using it that way was a corruption of the ideal. Bellah reaffirmed that in a seldom-noted piece on civil religion just seven years after the original essay (1974). Quoting from Richard Nixon's second inaugural address, Bellah pointed to themes of self-satisfaction, uncritical exceptionalism, and a type of personalist hubris in Nixon's speech. Bellah explicitly stated that there was not just “one” civil religion and considered Nixon's to be a different sort of national understanding than what he thought the nation should have. In *The Broken Covenant* (1975), he called Nixon's version an “empty shell” of American civil religion.

Bellah believed the nation had a prophetic and rich self-understanding, and he cautioned against civil religion being defined too narrowly. In the 1974 essay he argued that civil religion should be as symbolically empty—or open—as possible. He reasoned that too much specificity or substantive particularity would in effect exclude “significant groups of people who could not share overspecific symbols” (258). Again, Bellah favored the prophetic cast, but was concerned about maintaining civil religion's unifying capacity. He was, in this passage, specifically approving of historian Martin Marty's (1974) distinction between civil religion and “public theology,” but one can see how Bellah would think openness is crucial in civil religion. He believed civil religion was a force for unifying a diverse society and wanted it to be flexible enough to accommodate a multitude of subcultures, whether religious or ethnic.

There is sense in that position, as the importance of an “artful ambiguity” in public claims (Williams 1999) is well established. Such imprecision provides generalized ideas or public symbols that many different groups can fill in to suit themselves, according to their own cultural understandings. Different groups of people do, in fact, fill in the content

according to their own lights. But it is important to remember that those lights have been color-coded in American history. American civil religion has been open enough to allow abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., and President Barack Obama to make contributions to our understandings of the nation (Gorski 2017). But many groups of Americans have had no trouble with an implicit reading of “American” that continues to paint it White (Williams 2013). Bellah’s and Gorski’s commitment to civil religion’s inclusive potential does not fundamentally engage the deeply ingrained racial exclusion in American institutions and political culture.

The centrality of functional unity in thinking about civil religion, and the relative lack of consideration of race, is clearly apparent in the scholarly tradition that followed Bellah. For example, Peter Gardella (2014), working thoroughly within Bellah’s framework, offers many examples of where he sees American civil religion as open to self-reform and adjustment, including an accommodation to the United States as a “post-ethnic” society (363). He tells the story of the redevelopment of the Liberty Bell site in Philadelphia by the National Park Service and its incorporation of interpretive material regarding the colonial-era slave quarters that once existed, and were well-preserved, where the new “shrine” for the Bell was developed (75–78). The story demonstrates the difficult issues involved in fitting slavery into the American civil religious narrative but portrays them as capable of being absorbed without changing fundamental values or functions. Other examples include Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1999) and Raymond Haberski (2012), who recognize how central war and blood sacrifice are in embodying civil religion—“sacrifice for the nation” can be central to civil religion’s unifying functions. The call to war can call the nation together.

There is another stream of civil religion literature that explores the ways in which civil religion is not so unified, nor necessarily unifying. Sociologists N. J. Demerath and Rhys H. Williams (1985) discuss “civil religious discourse” as a type of political rationale and framing that is available to many different social movements and contentious causes. Martin Marty (1974) delineates “two kinds of two kinds” of civil religion, and notes the extent to which analysts’ normative commitments help lead them to posit whether any given expression represents the “true” civil religion (yet Marty does not foreground the relationship to political

power and social exclusion). Michael Hughey (1983) is critical of Bellah's argument that self-transcending aspects of American civic culture help make it a religious ethos for the *whole* society, rather than merely an ideology of a particular, and once-dominant, social strata. Wuthnow (1988) describes two versions of civil religion emerging out of the cultural changes following the 1960s—a conservative version that celebrates “one nation under God” and a liberal version that calls for “liberty and justice for all.”

These approaches recognize that civil religion may have multiple meanings, but they portray the situation as one where an ideology can have variations that adherents choose, based on their social locations or circumstances. One of those circumstances, of course, could be racial or ethnic identity. But the civil religion tradition, for the most part, treats that difference as functionally equivalent to whether one is liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic. Different civil religious traditions are understood as mostly a matter of the patterned interpretations that people perform in their expressions of culture and values. That access to civil religious understandings might be differentiated by race, or that the racialized nature of American social structure might definitively shape the substance and form that the nation's civil religion could take, makes no appearance in these critiques.

However, there is some scholarship that understands one of the constituent features of civil religion to be its exclusionary properties. In an examination of the history of American Exceptionalism, John Wilsey (2015) distinguishes between a “closed” and an “open” version of exceptionalist ideology. The closed version, such as publisher John L. O'Sullivan's “manifest destiny,” coupled sacred notions of the American covenant with Anglo-American supremacy. For O'Sullivan in particular, this was not only a social assumption but also an intellectual conclusion emerging out of his evolutionary thinking about the progress of civilizations. Wilsey also finds a grounding assumption of exclusion, particularly racial exclusion, in several other historical versions of “closed” exceptionalisms. He contrasts this with the “open” exceptionalisms of leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, who may have had patronizing and prejudicial attitudes about Black Americans, but was committed to a vision of the nation that could include all—and indeed had a duty to include all—as citizens. In many nineteenth-century political issues,



the future of slavery was a prominent concern. Thus, the very nature of who was excluded was central to the exceptionalisms that constituted the United States.

Richard T. Hughes, a religious studies scholar, writes about the “myths America lives by” (2003). He does not call them a “civil religion,” but he examines cultural and religious themes that many have thought of as expressions of civil religion—such as the myth of the “chosen nation” and the myth of the “Christian nation.” For Hughes these myths provide a national story, connected to higher purpose and historic destiny, in ways analogous to civil religion. He offers them as something of an historical development, describing each myth as it emerged in a particular period of national history, and then as they change and sustain thereafter. It is a much more fluid and historicized version of American self-understanding than Bellah’s treatment (more similar to Gorski’s 2017 approach). Bellah provided the forward to Hughes’s book, and indicated his sympathy with the analysis.

Crucially, in each chapter Hughes presents a critique of the myth in question, specifically framed through African Americans. African American experiences in North America, or Black American writers, artists, political leaders, and the like, provide a counter-perspective to the dominant stories. Civil religious understanding is thus not presented as overly unified and is shown to have been different for African Americans, leading to disputed understandings of the nation. Hughes limits the critique to African Americans, rather than opening it to other possible ethno-racial or religious minorities, partly for the distinct ways in which slavery and Jim Crow were aimed at Africans and their descendants, and partly because of their historical place as the United States’ largest minority.

This is a welcome analysis. Hughes recognizes the multiplicity of cultural voices and the centrality of racial inequality in national history. The format feels a bit contrived at times, and Hughes does not explore whether the critiques of each myth cohere into a fuller counternarrative. Because the focus is on African Americans specifically, there is not a conception of race that is seen as centrally built into the myths; rather it is a portrayal of where and for whom the myths got it “wrong.” Nor does Hughes wrestle with the idea that a racialized society must, almost by necessity, have a racialized civil religion. Hughes does note that a

self-understanding of “chosen-ness” means that some others are decidedly not chosen, and he recognizes the exclusionary potential.

This is similar to Gorski’s (2017) analysis of the ways in which the Puritan covenant left many out as the Puritans proclaimed themselves the New Hebrews. Indeed, Gorski posits an important moment when the covenant became racialized, as Increase Mather connected the blood of the Puritans with the covenant with God, and this was reinforced by King Philip’s War in the late seventeenth century (2017:55–57). This helped build a dimension of blood and conquest into the national story that remains active, and often vibrant, today.

Yet, Gorski wants to separate the conquest narrative, however grounded it might be in scriptural interpretation or embedded in American history, from “civil religion” properly understood. For him, the exclusionary properties of this self-understanding become part of the “religious nationalism” thread in American political culture. It is real, but lamentable, and not the way that Americans are best served understanding the connections between their religious culture and their national political story. Gorski, like Bellah, wants civil religion to be prophetic and republican, with the right mixture of de-sectarianized religious understandings mixed with a democratic form of civic republicanism that can be inclusive.

But I am wary of an analytic stance that considers only the religious-political connections of which I approve to be truly “civil religion.” I am sympathetic to Gorski’s normative project in many ways, but I don’t believe it takes the civil religion concept to where it needs to go analytically. When the civil religion literature engages American racial inequality, it too often treats it as a “problem” for the nation. Many then hope that civil religion can be part of a cultural discourse that could help right those past wrongs and further unify the country. But racialized social structures, including our national religious life, are too integral to the nation, to our history, and to our self-understandings to be sidelined from civil religious understandings. As I have argued previously (Williams 2013), the connections between blood and land are too central to religion for the United States to completely shun the “tribal” character embedded in our civil religious understandings. The Protestant religious responses to immigration, from the early nineteenth century to this moment, show how deeply American national identity is sacralized around

the experiences and identities of a particular people—the Western and Northern European Protestants who for so long dominated national life. The responses to the presidency of Barack Obama, in particular the stubborn insistence that he was Muslim as a way of emphasizing that he was not a “real American,” show how tightly religion *and* race remain linked to national identity.

Thus, if we are to grasp adequately the ways in which American religion is raced, we have to understand how our sacralized conception of the nation—our civil religious culture—weaves the two together. A similar claim can be made about sociological analyses of recent religious change. While often emphasizing division rather than unity, they need to incorporate the intersection of race and religion more integrally.

### Religious Divisions and Postwar Restructuring

Like Bellah’s civil religion narrative, Wuthnow’s restructuring was in many ways a story about White America. While not framed this way explicitly, Wuthnow’s thesis continued religious scholar Will Herberg’s (1955) story of the “de-ethnization” of White America, even as it challenged Herberg’s consensus-based story of what constituted “American” religion. Ethno-religious identities among White Americans, such as Dutch Calvinist, Swedish Lutheran, or Italian Catholic, had been documented at a scholarly level since social ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929). Both Herberg and Wuthnow show that these ethnic denominational identities became decreasingly important socially, residentially, politically, and in terms of marital choice.

Wuthnow tells this story persuasively with multiple sources of evidence. As the United States experienced a quarter-century of prosperity after the end of World War II, some fundamental changes occurred in social and cultural arrangements. The Great Depression, then the war mobilization, had created demands for domesticity and ordered home lives among many Americans. Good paying jobs, along with government assistance such as the GI bill, led to increasing education and the ability to buy a first house. People left crowded city neighborhoods and started families, and suburbs grew rapidly. Transportation infrastructure facilitated the commute from suburbs to central business districts and

jobs. One result was an increase in the “mixing” of White Americans in new neighborhoods, new public schools, and expanding middle-class professions. This followed, it should be noted, the mixing of *White* American men in the US military in World War II. State-level military mobilizations gave way to a national mobilization that put men from different regions, ethnicities, and religions in the same units. The classic cliché of the Hollywood World War II movie—a squad with a farm boy from Iowa, a Jewish kid from Brooklyn, an Italian Catholic son of recent immigrants, and an Irish American sergeant, was not a complete fabrication (especially as the officers remained thoroughly WASP-y).

America’s collective horror at the Nazi Holocaust helped lead to a decline in the acceptability of public expressions of anti-Semitism, and American Jews also moved out of ethnic neighborhoods in the Northeast to the West Coast and Florida (Moore 1994). There they experienced living in predominantly Protestant settings, rather than close to ethnic Catholic neighbors. In all, Catholics and Jews slowly became less “other” in American life. Rates of intermarriage rose. Institutions of higher education became less religiously segregated. Eventually, a Roman Catholic was even elected president of the United States (not, of course, without some concern from Protestant nativists). And during this entire period there were very low, legally mandated, immigration levels. So the story that Wuthnow, like Herberg, tells is an increasing mixing of the White American population and a decline in ethno-religious specificity. As historian Wendy Wall documents (2007), this was accompanied by a self-conscious construction of a “politics of consensus,” symbolizing this new cultural landscape.

The 1960s and its aftermath changed much of that. Wuthnow argues, along with others (e.g., Hammond 1992; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998), that differences in higher education, experiences with diversity, increased geographic and social mobility, and levels of affluence produced new religious and sociopolitical divisions. The war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights and other liberation movements, and a general challenge to the mores and folkways of White middle-class America cast the nation into a whirlwind of cultural and political conflict (this was the context in which Bellah was writing about civil religion). The basic divisions in American religion began to align with these differences. Whether one was liberal or conservative, educated and urban or working-class and small-town,

exposed to elite culture and cultural diversity or not, became central differences in religious practice as well as political orientation. These differences, among Protestants, had roots in the fundamentalist-modernist conflict of the early twentieth century, but Wuthnow's argument clearly implicates Catholics (and Jews) as well (even if those differences get much less attention in his empirical data).

The restructuring argument held that by the 1980s, when it came to religion and public politics, liberal Protestants had more in common with liberal Catholics than they did with conservative Protestants, and conservative Catholics were closer to conservative Protestants in many ways than they were to liberal Catholics. Conservative sociologist James Davison Hunter, inspired by the restructuring argument, drew on developments in highly visible moral-political issues such as abortion to expand the restructuring claim into a thesis about a "culture war" enveloping all public life and built on rival moral worldviews (1991). Despite its wild popularity in political commentary, scholars found a number of reasons to dispute the expansiveness of Hunter's claims (see Williams 1997). Nonetheless, there was recognition of a general realignment of religio-social differences and a recognition that liberal and conservative political coalitions had rival constructions of both economic and social issues (see Wuthnow's 1996 re-analysis). More recently, political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) and sociologist Mark Chaves (2017) have noted both polarization in American religion and an increasing alignment between religiosity and political commitments.

However, there was, and continues to be, a huge hole in this argument. Black Americans did not "restructure" in the same way White Americans had; they have retained a distinct combination of conservative theology, particularly around issues of sexuality and a Christ-centered theology, along with liberal economic and political views, particularly about government intervention to assist the less fortunate (e.g., Lockerbie 2013). Moreover, research has also found that a significant driver of the restructuring of religio-political attitudes among White Christians has been issues connected to race and governmental assistance to minorities—the "culture war" was not limited to concerns about sexuality and family morality (e.g., Olson 2008).

There clearly is a liberal/conservative division among American Catholics, as there is among Protestants. However, many of the

differences among Catholics on social and political issues have, in the last three decades, increasingly aligned with differences between Latinx and White non-Hispanic Catholics (see Ellison et al. 2011; Hunt 2001) and between Latinx Protestants and Catholics. That is, ethno-racial differences among Catholics remain significant, and Latinx groups have not “restructured” within Protestant or Catholic affiliations; rather, the increasing political divisions among American Hispanics align with Protestant and Catholic differences. Latinx Protestants are more likely to be politically and socially conservative as compared to Latinx Catholics. And among all American Catholics, Latinx Catholics are more likely to be politically liberal—especially on immigration and economic issues—than are White, non-Hispanic Catholics, even if they share some socially conservative attitudes (Bartkowski et al. 2012).

Granted, the thirty years since Wuthnow wrote his book have been marked by high levels of immigration, particularly among people from Latin America. This immigration has deeply affected the landscape of American Catholicism. It has become less “European” in orientation and more global, with significant populations of Latin Americans, Filipino/as, and Africans now in the United States. While perhaps unfair to have expected Wuthnow to have anticipated this development, nonetheless the restructuring argument among Catholics is less true than it was three decades ago. The restructuring argument was overwhelmingly supported by data on White Americans and basically has been an argument about the religio-political commitments of White Americans. It is a story of the de-ethnicization of White America after World War II that fundamentally does not recognize the ways in which race continues to divide and structure American religion.

My critique of the restructuring argument and its development is, on a basic level, a criticism that Wuthnow’s initial claim did not think systematically enough about non-White Americans. Things often vary by race and ethnicity, and such variation was not systematically explored. That said, I do recognize that making big arguments with survey data has problems accommodating many different types of minority populations. Samples often do not pick up enough respondents to enable meaningful statistics or findings. And I fully recognize that there is usefulness in studying the majority—knowing what White Americans are doing religiously is important because so many Americans are indeed “White.”

But there is nonetheless a too-easy conflation of the religious beliefs, practices, and identities of White Americans with an over-encompassing “American religion.” Scholars too often talk about “American” religion when they are basically talking about White Americans. Americans from ethno-racial minorities, or from minority religions, often practice their religions, or think about their commitments, differently, and scholars fail to recognize that with an unreflective use of “American.” However, beyond just variation across racial and ethnic categories—making race a more central “variable”—scholars are not thinking systematically enough about the ways in which religion is shaped by minority status and power relations. In the United States, few social structures have been more marked by intense hierarchies and power relationships than race. American religion, like American society generally, has been built on structures of racial disparities and precariousness. That needs to be taken into account more systematically in empirical work and more centrally in theoretical development.

This is not only about the “restructuring” thesis. A number of conceptual approaches to American religion have a similar blind spot. For example, the “religious economies” understanding of religious commitment focused a great deal of energy on the dynamics of “choice” as exercised by members and believers. The idea is that in a relatively unregulated civil sphere, a religious market develops that acts much like markets in other industries. “Firms” must compete for customers/members and thus innovate and accommodate in order to meet market demand. From the perspective of the religious individual, the emphasis is on assessing benefits and costs, and thus balancing “loyalty” or “exit” in remaining in, or leaving, any particular religious organization. Membership often becomes “client-like,” with satisfaction and voluntary choice as guiding principles.

But a number of empirical studies show that African Americans often do not understand their organizational commitments from such an individualized, choice-based framework. Sociologists Jessica Barron and Rhys H. Williams (2017) and Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby, and R. Stephen Warner (2016) found that, compared to similarly situated White parishioners, Black church members articulated their religious belonging with a distinctly different discourse—using a language of “calling” and family, with its connotation of obligation, rather

than choice or need-satisfaction. Sociologists Christopher Ellison and Darren Sherkat (1995) make a similar point when they examine regional differences in African Americans' participation in the "Black Church"—which they describe as a "semi-voluntary institution," recognizing that it meets the need for community in particular ways and as a result plays a distinct role in Black communities (see also Hutchinson's chapter in this volume). Several studies of the religious practices of new immigrant groups (e.g., Yang and Ebaugh 2001) also reveal how congregations, as communities, can provide both much needed social services as well as a cultural and social space that offers insulation and protection from an often-hostile society. They can offer some protection from outside threats—one can imagine that happening for Muslims currently, given rising Islamophobia—and they offer a bulwark against the internal fracturing of the community.

All of this implies that we need a more thorough integration in how we think about religion and race. It is not just that Blacks and Whites understand religious commitment differently, although they often do. It involves understanding how religion helps to structure the lives of minority communities, even as those dynamics emerge from the racial structuring of social life. Too often religion is treated as if it were distinct from race—divorced from it as both an identity and a way of being in the world. Anthropologist Nancy Foner (2015) and sociologist R. Stephen Warner (2015) have both compared anti-immigrant sentiments in Western Europe with those in the United States. The short form of the argument is that race is to the United States what religion is in Western Europe—a mark of otherness that becomes a basis for discrimination. Thus, England, France, and Germany struggle with recent immigration through disputes over religious practice and identity (overwhelmingly Muslim), whereas race is the crucial hierarchy in America and immigrants are evaluated based on that rather than their religion—hence the hostility to Mexican immigrants, even though they are Christian.

I do think that America's history of religious diversity, and often the acceptance of religious pluralism, has offered many immigrant groups some freedom to accommodate themselves in the United States even as they maintain a cultural ethno-religion. But pushing that argument too far misses connections by not using a more integrated understanding of discrimination and power as they are expressed in the intersections



of race and religion. For example, the history of anti-Catholicism in American nativism in the nineteenth century is significant and needs to be emphasized. But *who* Catholics were, ethnically and in relation to the Protestants then in the mainstream, matters. The Irish, Italian, and Greek Catholics (or Polish Jews) who came here were regularly conceptualized as being racially distinct as well. Of course, the conceptualization of race has changed—it was thought about differently when people could refer to the “Italian race” or the “Jewish race”—but this shows even more clearly the fuzzy boundaries between ethno-racial and religious identities. Many of the religious groups who came to North America and settled no doubt understood their religiousness in terms of “peoplehood”—as what we would call an ethno-religious category.

In the contemporary United States, scholars such as sociologist Gerardo Martí (2005) have demonstrated persuasively that there are circumstances where people in religious communities can build subjective identities that transcend ethno-racial categories. Not only is that significant but also we might be able to make a case that the United States offers a setting, as both multiethnic and religiously pluralist, that makes that distinctly possible compared to other nations. But often that does not happen. Even when it does, do *objective* identities that people inhabit—how they are coded by others as they navigate their lives—change as significantly as their subjective identities? It bears repeating that for reasons of collective security and community identity, ethno-racial minorities are less likely to separate religion from ethnicity. We often see how congregations can be safe spaces for African Americans or new immigrant communities. That only reinforces the mutual dependence and intersection of the dynamics of race and those of religion.

## Conclusion

Religion is not a separate sphere where people live in isolation. Social analysts cannot treat the religious realm as if it has its own dynamics that hold everything else constant—as if it were some kind of “beta” coefficient in a multiple regression equation, an isolated cause or effect that has its distinct realm. “*Ceterus paribus*” is more often a hypothetical than a real-life, on-the-ground situation. People’s race and religion are intertwined in their identities—just as the United States’

racial structures and history are intertwined with religious stories in our national identity. This is clearly central to the idea that “religion is raced.” When analyzing “American religion,” whether as a set of cultural institutions or as a narrative that defines the nation as a people, intersections between religion and race must be both conceptualized and considered empirically. We cannot discuss “the American experience” by only referencing the descendants of Western European countries, or only Protestants, or now, only Christians. “American” cannot be so overly and unreflectively inclusive that all get swept into a White Protestant story. We cannot assume “Whiteness” when studying the religion of all Americans. Beyond just looking for the differences in the experiences of ethno-religious minorities, we must understand how these social groups are racial *and* religious “others,” that is, how structured inequalities and ongoing power relations push them into invisibility or a coerced assimilative conformity. This will often challenge who we think about when we think about “Americans.” Our coming century will demand that change.

## REFERENCES

- Atchison, Liam J., Keith Bates, and Darin D. Lenz, eds. 2018. *Civil Religion and American Christianity*. Mountain Home, AR: BorderStone Press.
- Barron, Jessica M., and Rhys H. Williams. 2017. *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bartkowski, John P., Aida I. Ramos-Wada, Chris E. Ellison, and Gabriel A. Acevedo. 2012. “Faith, Race-Ethnicity, and Public Policy Preferences: Religious Schemas and Abortion Attitudes Among U.S. Latinos.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51 (2): 343–358.
- Beiner, Ronald. 2011. *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bellah, Robert N. 1967. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 96: 1–21.
- . 1974. “American Civil Religion in the 1970s.” In *American Civil Religion*, edited by R. E. Richey and D. G. Jones, 255–272. New York: Harper & Row.
- . 1975. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Chaves, Mark. 2017. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. 2nd edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coleman, John A. 1970. “Civil Religion.” *Sociological Analysis* 31: 67–77.
- Demerath, N. J. III, and Rhys H. Williams. 1985. “Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society.” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 480: 154–166.

- Edwards, Korie L. 2016. "Expanding Our View: Seeing Bellah's American Civil Religion through a Black Feminist Lens." Presented at Center for the Study of Religion & American Culture, Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (November).
- Ellison, Christopher G., Gabriel A. Acevedo, and Aida I. Ramos-Wada. 2011. "Religion and Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage Among U.S. Latinos." *Social Science Quarterly* 92 (1): 35–56.
- Ellison, Christopher G., and Darren Sherkat. 1995. "The 'Semi-Voluntary' Institution Revisited: Regional Variations in Church Participation among Black Americans." *Social Forces* 73 (4): 1415.
- Foner, Nancy. 2015. "Is Islam in Western Europe Like Race in the United States?" *Sociological Forum* 30 (4): 885–899.
- Gardella, Peter. 2014. *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gorski, Philip E. 2017. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haberski, Raymond J., Jr. 2012. *God and War: Civil Religion since 1945*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hammond, Philip E. 1992. *Religion and Personal Autonomy*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Herberg, Will. 1955. *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.
- Hughes, Richard T. 2003. *Myths America Lives By*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Hughey, Michael W. 1983. *Civil Religion and Moral Order*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hunt, Larry L. 2001. "Religion, Gender and the Hispanic Experience in the United States: Catholic/Protestant Differences in Religious Involvement, Social Status, and Gender-Role Attitudes." *Review of Religious Research* 43 (2): 139–160.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lockerbie, Brad. 2013. "Race and Religion: Voting Behavior and Political Attitudes." *Social Science Quarterly* 94 (4): 1145–1158.
- Martí, Gerardo. 2005. *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Marty, Martin E. 1974. "Two Kinds of Civil Religion." In *American Civil Religion*, edited by R. E. Richey and D. G. Jones. New York: Harper & Row.
- Marvin, Carolyn, and David W. Ingle. 1999. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, Deborah Dash. 1994. *To the Golden Cities*. New York: Free Press.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1929. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Olson, Joel. 2008. "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics." *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (4): 704–718.
- Phillips, Nichole Renee. 2018. *Patriotism Black and White: The Color of American Exceptionalism*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

- Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reed, Jean-Pierre, Rhys H. Williams, and Kathryn B. Ward. 2016. "Civil Religious Contention in Cairo, Illinois: Priestly and Prophetic Ideologies in a 'Northern' Civil Rights Struggle." *Theory & Society* 45 (1): 25–55.
- Richey, Russell E., and Donald G. Jones, eds. 1974. *American Civil Religion*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Riley, Alexander T. 2015. *Angel Patriots: The Crash of United Flight 93 and the Myth of America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wall, Wendy L. 2007. *Inventing the "American Way"*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Warner, R. Stephen. 2015. "Race Is to the U.S. as Religion Is to Europe." Invited lecture at Chautauqua Institution, New York, July 13.
- Warner, William Lloyd. 1959. *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Williams, Rhys H., ed. 1997. *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- . 1999. "Public Religion and Hegemony: Contesting the Language of the Common Good." In *The Power of Religious Publics*, edited by W. H. Swatos, Jr. and J. K. Wellman, 169–186. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- . 2013. "Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama's America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2): 239–257.
- Williams, Rhys H., and Todd Nicholas Fuist. 2014. "Civil Religion and National Politics in a Neoliberal Era." *Sociology Compass* 8 (7): 929–938.
- Williams, Rhys H., Courtney Ann Irby, and R. Stephen Warner. 2016. "'Church' in Black and White: The Organizational Lives of Young Adults." *Religions* 7 (7): 90.
- Wilsey, John D. 2015. *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Wuthnow, Robert 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 1996. "Restructuring of American Religion: Further Evidence." *Sociological Inquiry* 66 (3): 303–329.
- . 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yang, Fenggang, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. 2001. "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications." *American Sociological Review* 66 (2): 269–288.