

Robert Bellah's Concept of Civil Religion in America and the Idea of New Religion in Czech Thinking of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

*At the end of the 1960s sociologist Robert Bellah formulated his concept of American civil religion, a concept which has since then provoked considerable reaction among scholars and intellectuals. It identified specific religious features in American public life and traditions, rejected by some, enthusiastically accepted by others.¹ Bellah claims that since the seventeenth century the idea of the promised land, of a new age and a new nation with a mission in the world closely connected with Biblical symbolism has been emphasized by, among others, the Puritans. Since that time this first American Republic was gradually abandoned during the twentieth century, America having according to Bellah betrayed its original ideals. In this paper, features of Bellah's *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1975, 1992) are paralleled with similar tendencies in Czech culture in connection with the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The first Czechoslovak President Tomáš G. Masaryk as well as other intellectuals of the time propagated the idea of a new religion, one for a new era.² Certain parallels can be drawn between an American civil religion and the Czech idea of the new religion, despite the fact that unlike the American puritans, the Czech interwar situation was formed by the spirit of Enlightenment, romanticism, and anti-clericalism. Both versions of civil religion embrace the principle that the stability of a democratic, republican nation state and its politics requires more than just external norms and rules. The idea of a non-ecclesiastical, secularly understood religiosity in democratic society can therefore be seen as their shared vision.*

KEYWORDS

American civil religion, Robert Bellah, American culture, Czech philosophy, *new religion*, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk

Robert Bellah tried to understand certain relevant features of American tradition from the perspective of the twentieth century. He believed that since the seventeenth century, a clear idea closely connected with biblical symbolism emphasized by puritans as "the coming of the millennium, the fullness of times, when God would create a new heaven and a new earth"³ has been forming. The new age is starting in northern America in the light of a transcendental spiritual and moral vision. Bellah is the first sociologist to formulate the idea of American civil religion in this context. His idea has inspired a long

1 See Richard K. Fenn, "The Relevance of Bellah's 'Civil Religion' Thesis to a Theory of Secularization," *Social Science History* (1977): 502–517; Gail, Gehring, "The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (1981): 51–63.

2 The author of this article has published several texts concerning the idea of the new religion in Czech thought which served as basis for this article. These are especially: Tomáš Bubík, *Úvod do české filozofie náboženství* [Introduction to the Czech Philosophy of Religion] (Pardubice: University of Pardubice, 2009) and Tomáš Bubík, *České bádání o náboženství ve 20. století* [Czech Study of Religion in the 20th Century] (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2010).

3 Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 2nd edition), 61.

lasting discussion.⁴ During the forty years of its existence, it has aroused different groups of opponents and supporters which Bellah divides into several types. Some critics claim that no such thing as an American civil religion exists, that the idea is a purely theoretical construct not based on existing reality. Other scholars state that such a phenomenon exists but refuse to call it religion because it does not have the features of one. Therefore they propose instead to call the phenomenon “public piety.” Still others believe that civil religion exists but, based on the character of American democratic system and the specific emphasis on liberty and freedom, it should not. Some American studies academics stress that Bellah’s idea is nothing new, that similar concepts have been discussed for years.⁵ Religious studies scholars have been more receptive to his concept and have shown appreciation for the depth with which he reflects on the often unconscious assumptions of American politics and public life which, regardless of the separation of church and state, often have an inherently religious character as well as significantly influence the image of the United States abroad.

Bellah illustrates that in their beliefs that “what is good for America is good for the world,” Americans in fact see themselves as American Israelites, a God chosen people whose task it is to create an ideal society and a universal form of government. These beliefs also prevailed in the nineteenth century. For example, in a well known passage in *White-Jacket* (1850) Herman Melville referred to Americans as:

the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. [...] Long enough have we have been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come, but he has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings.⁶

Such notions appeared not only in American politics or literature but also in theology – both Christian and Jewish, as Bellah emphasizes. Similarly to Melville, Rabbi Wise, an important figure of American Judaism accepted the redeemer role of America but he understood it not as a form of political liberation or even transformation but as an example set by America for millions of oppressed men and women around the world.⁷ “It is essential that we understand the relation between a renewed Protestant piety and a gradually clarifying American national consciousness if we are to grasp the meaning of American myth and symbol in the 19th century and our inheritance from it.”⁸ Therefore the orators of American culture were not only the Founding Fathers, important personages of American political life, or proponents of philosophical theories but ministers of diverse religious denominations as well. They influenced public opinion and helped to form the spirit and culture of America and, as Bellah claims, also of American civil religion.

4 Matteo Bortolini, Bortolini, Matteo. “The trap of intellectual success. Robert N. Bellah, the American civil religion debate, and the sociology of knowledge.” *Theory & Society* 41 (2/2012): 187–210.

5 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 164–165.

6 Herman Melville, *White-Jacket* (London: Richard Bentley, 1850), 239. Available at books.google.com, retrieved 30th May 2012. For a more detailed discussion of this passage see for example Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 156–160.

7 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 40.

8 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 45.

An empty and broken shell

Every foundation moment contains a kind of messianic enthusiasm and expectation; it has yet no history, no memory and its ambiguity has not yet crystallized.⁹ "In the messianic atmosphere surrounding the birth of the republic it was common to refer to England or to Europe in general as Babylon, in contrast to the New Jerusalem which was America. Today we hear angry voices cry 'Babylon' against America."¹⁰ Thus in the past few decades the United States is perceived as a world superpower that supports peace and democracy only in regards to its own interests. General answers to the question of why this is so is the view that ideological and value crises inevitably affect all grand ideals. However, we cannot be satisfied with such an answer.

Bellah maintains that the reason is particularly because "today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell" and he even dares to claim that it was even in the beginning merely an "external covenant."¹¹ He believes that the United States lacks a sealant, some connecting element of politics and society. Thus he sees the current situation as critical and calls for a new beginning, for a renewal of the old ideals and of the narrative that he claims existed as the basis of the republic. His critique functions as a spring board for the search of fundamental features of American identity which needs revitalizing. According to Bellah many contemporary Americans feel that their problems are caused by the failure of a central vision which they keep seeking. In doing so they turn to grand mythical narratives and symbols of world religions to recover it or discover it anew¹²

Nevertheless, "in a republic an external covenant alone is never enough. It is of the nature of a republic that its citizens must love it, not merely obey it. The external covenant must become an internal covenant and many times in American history that has happened."¹³ Bellah maintains that at least the external covenant – this classic form of civil religion – needs to be renewed. He then accentuates the importance of this tradition, or at least that part of the tradition containing myth, a part which reveals reality by the means of emotional experience and advises citizens on how they should relate to it. Besides tradition, perceptive (not technical) reason also allows for the understanding of the whole. In current political thought, tendencies to cultivate virtue by invoking a sense of tradition appear, and not only in the spirit of conservatism. Such a sense of tradition is a key part of the means by which the citizenry may grasp future possibilities made possible in the present by the past.¹⁴

At the same time, Bellah states that "critical Americans must not leave the tradition of American idealism entirely to the chauvinists" and that a great nation cannot be transformed without appealing to its spirit, without stimulating national idealism.¹⁵ "Culture is the key to revolution; religion is the key to culture."¹⁶ One road to change

9 For example the historian Jochen Bleicken claims that "people of Athens considered their political system as only their own, incomparable with any other in their surroundings and as exceptional in every aspect." Jochen Bleicken, *Athénská demokracie* (Praha: Oikúmené, 2002), 55.

10 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 139.

11 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 142.

12 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 157.

13 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 142.

14 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1981), 207.

15 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 162.

16 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 162.

therefore leads through religion. Bellah considers the idea of non-religious state as very modern and at the same time also very problematic.¹⁷ The republican concept of the state has distinct ethical, educational, and spiritual roles.¹⁸

Bellah's American civil religion, which has a close affinity to Rousseau's concept of civil religion, obviously has no express legal support in American Constitution. Its operation is limited by the separation of church and state. Bellah tries to illustrate that in the eighteenth century

[t]here was a common set of religious and moral understanding rooted in a conception of divine order under a Christian, or at least a deist, God. The basic moral norms that were seen as deriving from that divine order were liberty, justice, and charity, understood in a context of theological and moral discourse which led to a concept of personal virtue as the essential basis of a good society.¹⁹

A good society, therefore, cannot exist without emphasis on the morally good life of the individual, thus it cannot be created only on the basis of given legal norms – fear of legal punishment is an unstable motivation for obeying the law.

We can sum up that the new American republic was formed on one hand by a strong opposition to England (or Europe in general) and its values, on the other hand was strongly motivated by new opportunities and a differently formulated concept of liberty, freedom, personal as well as civic virtues. Liberty was seen as liberty from the British tyranny and from royal government. Nevertheless, Republican liberty was often seen as intertwined with a Christian notion of a virtuous, pious life. At the same time a pious life had to be a life of a free person or in other words of a person liberated from sin.

We can detect a similar line of thought in the Czech interwar intelligentsia's focus on the national and the democratic. In the atmosphere of spiritual and political unrest at the beginning of the twentieth century when the First World War was threatening, many philosophical speculations focused on the search for new values as opposed to traditional or aristocratic ones, which were already moribund. The search for a new religion was certainly among the most talked about topics of philosophy in the Czech lands. It was generally agreed that a modern man²⁰ wants to live a religious life but not in the obsolete ecclesiastical faith serving the old absolutist system. Thus the question was not whether a modern Czech was religious or spiritually oriented, but what the features of his new spirituality were and how they differed from traditional religion. The intellectual battle was spearheaded especially against Catholicism in favor of a so-called new Czech national religion, the importance of which was seen particularly in the sphere of ethics and humanism.

The seeds of Czechoslovakian politics and statehood therefore grew out of radical opposition to the aristocratic concept of the state, monarchic regime and empire as well as out of a concept of liberty newly understood as freedom from authoritarian politics, from Vienna and Rome, i.e. from the monarchy and the Church, respectively. The transition from monarchy to democracy, from the traditionally understood faith to the "new faith" was seen as a fugacious critical phase. Old values were rejected, new ones not yet established.

17 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 166.

18 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 172.

19 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, xvii.

20 The term "modern man" often meant a freethinking intellectual who valued freedom of thought and political freedom.

Even theologians of the period openly assessed the state of society as suffering from a spiritual crisis. The old faith of the Church was seen as deteriorated and many did not believe that traditional churches could lead the society out of the crisis. Thus the crisis was seen as serious, as it affected the core of spiritual and cultural life. Religious crisis was the cause of this general crisis and it was manifested in the fact that members of churches no longer believed in their teachings. This led to a moral and cultural (in the broadest sense of the word) upheaval. Churches no longer had enough courage to solve the crisis because they would have had to change their doctrine. Modern man was refusing the old religion of the traditional churches but was not capable of creating a new one without their help.²¹ The central question then is: "how to believe in modern times?"²²

Intellectuals considered Catholicism to be in fundamental contradiction with democracy and social progress, yet Rome was still considered a strong adversary. Modern democracy was trying to establish a relationship to Catholicism but was set critically against any residues of aristocratic rule. However, traditional "religion remains today a moral and a sociological fact."²³ There were still no signs that Catholicism would be wholly rejected and that Czech post-WWI society would look up to the Czech Reformation. Therefore new forms of religiosity or spirituality, or even of religion conceived as civil, were sought. One requirement of the new religion was especially stringent – that this religion must not become a political force in democracy and must be kept away from political life. It must be limited to the sphere of morals and spirituality.²⁴

In the Czech thought of the interwar years we find several suggestions about what to do about the contemporary situation: 1) deepen Christianity, 2) abandon religion as such, 3) seek new forms in our own culture, or 4) look for it elsewhere. All these were connected with a strong criticism of existing church forms of religion, particularly Catholicism. This critique of Catholicism was the beginning of a way out of the crisis.

Importance of central vision

As already stated, Bellah believes that the problems of contemporary Americans are especially caused by the failure of a central vision. Many feel that this vision must have a spiritual or even religious basis. "Unlike most historic peoples, America as a nation began on a definite date, July Fourth, 1776. Thus, in analyzing America's myth of origin, close attention must be paid to the mythic significance of the Declaration of Independence, which is considerable."²⁵ "America came to be thought of as a paradise and a wilderness, with all of the rich associations of those terms in the Christian and biblical traditions, or, more simply, thus Europeans came to think of America as both a heaven and a hell."²⁶ To European newcomers, the biblical tradition offered images and symbols for expressing their feelings, hopes and anxieties stemming from the new situation; it simultaneously allowed them to characterize their experience of meeting with the uncivilized new world.

21 Alois Spisar, *Ideový úkol církví v náboženské krizi dneška* (Praha: Blahoslav, 1926), 11.

22 Spisar, *Ideový úkol církví v náboženské krizi dneška*, 43.

23 František V. Krejčí, *Náboženství v demokracii* (Praha: Svaz národního osvobození, 1924), 6.

24 Krejčí, *Náboženství v demokracii*, 8.

25 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 3.

26 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 6. See also 9, 61.

The tension between hope and fear of the unknown fundamentally influenced the ideas of new settlers about American continent.²⁷

For the puritans, despite their stress on hard work, a strong tension existed between the faith in god and the earthly life. They rejected a humanistic perspective on life and politics. Bellah maintains that this tension was already in the nineteenth century a thing of the past. The Calvinist teaching about the sinfulness of the world were inverted, therefore "Both man and the world, at least in America, are essentially innocent." Success is taken as a sign of god's blessing and of virtuous life. Thus Bellah claims that particularly Anglo-Saxon Protestants formulated the "gospel of wealth and the ideal of success."²⁸

John Locke tended to identify America "with the state of nature, [and] defined the latter as State of Peace, Goodwill, Mutual Assistance, and Preservation." On the other hand, "the Hobbesian image of the American state of nature was not paradise but wilderness (*homo homini lupus* or dog eat dog), in the most negative sense of that word: unfruitful desert, abode of death."²⁹ However, it was Locke who had from the philosophical point of view the strongest influence, not Hobbes, a proponent of radical theoretical individualism different from both the Christian and the Roman tradition with its repudiation of the terms *God* and *Good*. Overcoming the wilderness and building a city upon a hill in the biblical sense was seen by the first Massachusetts Bay settlers as a Divine command. Although this original task has gradually been radically changed, its influence exists on an abstract level and is still present in some respect even nowadays represented in the American life style. The general positive outlook of Americans on the world is perhaps a consequence of Locke's legacy and, even more so, of the biblical idea that the god-created world is essentially good.

"A myth of origin for America must point to certain events in America, not only to their archetypal foreshadowing in biblical history."³⁰ The American Founding Fathers also employed non-biblical motives and symbols, not British but Roman, and Roman classicism prevailed even in architecture and the arts, in "the surface symbolism" of the early republic.

Its very terminology was Latinate, the words "republic" "president," "congress," and "senate," being Latin in origin and clearly distinct from the terminology of their British counterparts. The great seal of the United States bears two Latin mottos, *E pluribus unum* and *Novus ordo saeculorum* [...]³¹

In the interwar Czechoslovakia Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk ranked as the most significant political and intellectual figure, one who set the tone of the period's thought and asserted philosophical ideas both in his politics and in public life. As the first President, he set the foundations of the democratic state of Czechoslovakia, which came into existence after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy on the 28th of October 1918 as a result of the post-WWI reorganization of Europe. Masaryk's rhetoric was set against religious superficiality, dishonesty, ecclesiasticism and traditionalism. Despite Masaryk's criticism of Catholicism, a comment by a contemporary is apropos: "religion is a most

27 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 12.

28 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 76.

29 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 8.

30 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 13.

31 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 23.

important issue for him."³² His entire work is an ongoing polemic against religious indifference.³³ It is true that Masaryk's definition of religion did not work with the term "God," yet he did consider religion as a central spiritual vital force in the striving for a new life with new values.³⁴ He nevertheless emphasized that religion should not be a primarily political affair.

In *V boji o náboženství* (1904) [In the struggle for religion] Masaryk claimed that religious freedom must be a prerequisite for progress because such freedom allows modern man to strive for religion by means of critical thinking and emphasis on the idea of progress. He refused the notion of progress as the gradual demise of religion. Apart from this, he shared the period's belief that science has surpassed theological thinking (not religion itself) and therefore proclaims their separation. For him, theology is but a form of advocacy for church's teachings.³⁵ Despite his inclination towards science, he did not see his concept of religion as "scientific religion," but he would require that science and religion (here he meant theology specifically) not remain in conflict.

In spite of the period's skepticism and religious crisis Masaryk believed that genuine atheism is very rare and exceptional. Even modern natural science is not anti-religious, not even materialistic. Masaryk maintains that a man nurtured by modern science has "higher ideas about God."³⁶ He wanted an unrevealed religion which would be in accord with moral progress and the social sentiment of the most ennobled people. He particularly emphasized an active attitude of love to others in general and especially to one's neighbors. The new apolitical religion of freedom must also be consistent with the Czech national character.³⁷ The ideal of the pure religion centers on Jesus, as Masaryk believed that from him we can all learn how to love God and how to center on our fellow humans. However, Jesus was for him merely a man, and Masaryk did not believe in Jesus' divinity or saviorship. In Masaryk's thinking, we can detect a movement away from *Jesus as Savior* to *Jesus as man*.³⁸ Masaryk generally accentuated Jesus' moral teachings, as the image of Jesus as conveyed in the gospels was unacceptable to him for its aristocratic ideal.

Masaryk's idea of new religion is very general and abstract. The new religion should be nobler and higher, non-political with no religious formalism. It should simply be better, simply a free moral and religious association based not on blind faith but on well-grounded beliefs that should be learned from Jan Hus. In this respect, Masaryk returned to Czech traditions.³⁹ In the new religion, the foremost idea must be faith not in God, but a belief in or a hope for immortality. It is particularly this belief that for the most part motivates people to love their neighbors and to lead a moral life. Therefore, for Masaryk it is most important to liberate schools from the influence of the Church and to propose changes in the legal system to make sure that affiliations with state recognized churches had no impact on public life.⁴⁰ Religious education at schools was

32 Josef Kratochvíl, *Přehledné dějiny filosofie* (Brno: Barvič a Novotný, 1924), 165.

33 Josef L. Hromádka, *Masaryk* (Praha: YMCA 1930), 129.

34 Tomáš G. Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství* (Praha: Jan Laichter, 1904).

35 Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství*, 9–10.

36 Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství*, 32.

37 Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství*, 29.

38 Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství*, 29.

39 Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství*, 29.

40 Stanislav Klíma, *České náboženství* (Praha: B. Kočí, 1920), 11–12.

seen as a stumbling-block in the relationship between the democratic state and the Catholic Church.⁴¹

Masaryk merely outlined the philosophical contours of the new religion and this ambiguity may be one reason he influenced a whole generation of thinkers who then developed further this originally Comtean concept of the new religion of Humanity. Masaryk's idea of the new religion can certainly be described in the context of his scientific attitude, which entailed the belief in progress, humanity, democracy and republicanism as well as a lay form of society, but also a faith in the national character, in *Czech-ness*.

Features of civil (new) religion

Just as the President-philosopher Masaryk stressed the importance of the new secularly conceived religion in Czechoslovakia, a similar tendency is evident in the early United States and its key political figures. "In a sense the deistic symbolism remained embalmed at the level of the civil religion, since it was above all Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison who set the tone of the national cult. Public proclamations tended even to avoid the word God, referring instead to "Providence."⁴² There was a strong emphasis on deistic language which could hardly speak to spiritual life of individuals or to their religious ideas, nor could it motivate them to pious deeds. In deistic thinking, God has changed into a "Supreme Being," and instead of the Last Judgment deists speak merely of an afterlife. According to Bellah, there is also no religious conversion, no rebirth in Christ and no covenant between God and people in this philosophy. In place of these ideas, emphasis was placed on "the pursuit of private secular advancement and public secular good. [...] Piety has been replaced by prudence."⁴³ This clearly foreshadows Masaryk's ideas as well as the ideas of several other Czech intellectuals, as we shall see.

The Founding Fathers assumed that the external and general spiritual framework of deism could be filled with amorphous religious content appropriate for the newly established, broadly conceived value system of American politics and the notion of liberty. As Bellah maintains, de Tocqueville was aware that

the political operation of religion in America was different from that conceived by many 18th century philosophers, for here religion was not controlled by a hierarchy of priests monopolizing the dispensing of sacraments and the interpretation of dogma. Rather religion itself was "democratic and republican," submitting "the truths of the other world to private judgment."⁴⁴

A search for a new, more secular form of religiosity or a new religion (or even religions) was symptomatic of the great transformation of the Czech lands from monarchy to democracy. Many thinkers did not believe that religion should be a dead matter for modern people, and that, in order to be truly modern, culture should be completely non-religious if not outright anti-religious. Some did not search for a new religion merely by negating Catholicism, but by testing alternatives. Philosophers were joined in their discussions on the new religion by many protestant theologians, the most significant

41 František Bednář, *Církev a stát* (Praha: Melantrich, 1934), 216.

42 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 45.

43 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 69.

44 Bellah, *The Broken, Covenant*, 48.

among them being František Žilka. In *Národnost a náboženství* (1919) [Nationality and Religion] Žilka noted that there is an apparent not only instinctive but also artificially incited resistance towards Protestantism as a “product of the German spirit.” At the same time, Czechs should refuse Catholicism as non-Czech.⁴⁵ Tendencies to establish a national church built on the legacy of Cyril and Methodius,⁴⁶ the Hussite movement and Jan Comenius resulted in the founding of two new churches in Czechoslovakia after 1918, both with great societal impact, both following in the footsteps of the Czech Reformation. The Czech Brethren evangelical church was founded 1918 and the Czechoslovakian church was founded in 1920 with the appellation “Hussite” despite the fact that Žilka did not consider the ideals of the Czech Reformation as an appropriate or even realistic alternative to Catholicism.

The influence of Masaryk on the period’s thought inspired many intellectuals who likewise refused church dogma, among them for example former Catholic priest Ladislav Kunte. If Masaryk was interested especially in the importance of Czech religion, i.e. in the interconnectedness of religion and national character, in a similar way Kunte also maintained that new religion need be in harmony with the nation and its culture. He saw “national religion” as the deepest, the most immediate expression of the national character⁴⁷ and believed nationalism to have a religious function, as faith in nation and in the cult of the nation were its typical features. The content of the belief in a nation is, according to Kunte, created on the same basis as in the case of religious belief. In the context of the nationalism and national liberation movements in many European countries of the time he expected the faith in nation to define the spirit of the new era. He wanted to avoid, however, the identification of new religion with nationalistic chauvinism, very strong at the time, and therefore he preferred Masaryk’s emphasis on the humanist character of the new religion, which should then contain national, social as well as ethical values and ideals.⁴⁸ Kunte’s concept of religion thus paralleled the ideas of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim.

Interesting ideas on new religion appeared also in the works of the Czech intellectuals connected with the freethought movement. In many ways, they were inspired by both August Comte and Masaryk. One of the most significant freethinkers was Otakar Kunstovský (1884–1945). Although his attitude towards churches was generally negative, he tried not to generalize but to acknowledge how deep the differences between various churches can be. He saw the greatest difference between the Catholic Church, which had not changed over time and remained fixed to entrenched positions regardless of the dynamic development of aspects of societies, and protestant churches, which were trying to accommodate the new ideas of democracy, liberty and progress.⁴⁹ If a religion is to be justified in contemporary times, Kunstovský says, it must differ from ancient religion; therefore protestant churches, for example, will embark on the way to progress only when they set aside their “bibliography,”⁵⁰ i.e. their stress on the Bible (*sola scriptura*). Kunstovský paid great attention to the idea of the new religion and like many

45 František Žilka, *Národnost a náboženství* (Praha: B. Kočí, 1919), 39.

46 Cyril and Methodius were invited to Great Moravia in 863 by the knight Rastislav from Byzantine Thessaloniki to evangelize the Slavs. The two saints created the Glagolitic alphabet for liturgical purposes and translated parts of Bible into the Old Slavonic language. In the Czech lands, they are traditionally considered the most important of Christian missionaries.

47 Ladislav Kunte, *Náboženství, socialism, národ* (Praha: Melantrich, 1923), 111.

48 Ladislav Kunte, *Vznik nového náboženství* (Praha: S. Minařík, 1920), 106.

49 Otakar Kunstovský, *Náboženství dnešního člověka* (Praha: Obroda, 1924), 7–8.

50 Kunstovský, *Náboženství dnešního člověka*, 29.

intellectuals of his times also maintained that it must be non-committal and must stress ethical and moral aspects as well as reason. Unlike his contemporaries, he went so far as to imagine the creation of a modern religious society with rituals, symbols and active service (especially in the political and social sphere) in the name of Humanity. Politically he inclined towards the left and sympathized with undifferentiated socialism.⁵¹ For him, Humanity was the ideal religion through which the human and the metaphysical merge into one, the main task being the service to the humanity within oneself as well as in others.⁵² Naturally the new religion's main aim is not otherworldly salvation and it places human destiny firmly into earthly life.

Unlike Kunstovský, Ladislav Štolfa, another freethinker, maintained a more universalist concept of the new religion – that the basic religious and moral truths cannot be limited to just one religion, one religious teacher or one nation because “the light of absolute good and truth shines more or less everywhere.”⁵³ Therefore the road to truth leads through following the example of important personalities of religious history. Any new religion, led particularly by the religiously educated, must be in harmony with scientific discoveries and must not contradict reason. Service therein should be a truly heartfelt experience of art, its highest law the law of love, and prayer should shift the soul towards grand ideals. Štolfa even did not reject the idea that the new religion may have priests – they should be the great personalities of Czech arts and culture such as Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana and Svatopluk Čech. The new religion's temple should be nature, an idea that echoes the American transcendentalists.

Štolfa believed that his concept was essentially in accordance with those of Karel H. Borovský and Tomáš G. Masaryk. It was precisely such a religion that would preach true humanity, would ennoble humankind, and would become the basis of a new civilization as well as be a protection against the emptiness caused by the denial of traditional religion and the materialism resulting from this.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In comparing the ideas of the two sociologists Bellah and Masaryk it becomes clear that religion is in some way important for democracy, which as a political system generates a specific form of spiritual orientation often called civil spirituality or even civil religion, to iterate Bellah's term. Both Bellah and Masaryk share the belief that the basis of democratic society cannot be only the legally declared principles of liberty, justice and humanity but that these values need be guaranteed and confirmed by a principle of higher order. As Masaryk speaks of a deep feeling of transcendence leading to a moral life, Bellah speaks of the concept of a divine order in a Christian or deistic sense which is a prerequisite for respect for the norms and values declared by the democratic state. The specific features shared by Czech and American philosophical discussions on the civic form of religion are secularism, open-mindedness and the individual as well as the religion's national, republican and generally humanistic character.

51 Kunstovský, *Náboženství dnešního člověka*, 98.

52 Kunstovský, *Náboženství dnešního člověka*, 74.

53 Ladislav Štolfa, *Za novým náboženstvím* (Praha: Unitaria, 1927), 67.

54 Štolfa, *Za novým náboženstvím*, 62–72.

The question also arises as to what degree such concepts can be considered religious despite the fact that they exhibit certain specific religious features. On the other hand, they lack (or only vaguely contain) certain religious elements such as doctrine, cult, and organization. It is important to note in this context that the term *religion* has also come to be problematic in the field of religious studies and the sociology of religion. The term has been thus redefined numerous, with scholars often disagreeing on a definition and sometimes even rejecting the word completely. Depending on the point of view of particular socio-cultural discourse, religion is often understood as a pure theoretical construct. Similar problems are connected with Bellah's notion of the American civil religion and with the Czech attempts at defining a new religion. Disputes continue over what is religious and what is secular as well as whether any distinction between the two exists; debates persist over the question of whether it is legitimate to speak about the sacralization of politics,⁵⁵ social class or the state as a whole.

It is well known that during the twentieth century democratic principles were introduced into a variety of churches and religious denominations. Democracy advocating core civil rights and the spirit of modernity inspired (intentionally or not) the search for forms of spirituality that resonate with the folk character of democratic society, with the common daily life which could speak simply to common people. In many ways, differences between churches have been evened out. Churches started to realize that they can better address people when they rid themselves of a variety of external forms. For the new civil forms of religion a liberally understood spirituality freed of church tradition, doctrine, liturgy, and sometimes even of morals was crucial. Therefore the quest for a new religion usually did not occur within established churches, as from their point of view this would be considered a peculiar and unacceptable alternative.

Bellah's concept of civil religion in America may be understood as an attempt at the interpretation and re-valorization of one of the key phases in the history of American society, its specific spiritual legacy seen as its "true" fundament. On one hand, it provides an interesting insight into the sociology of culture and politics, on the other it is an idealization of it. This is also an attempt to not only name and analyze this phase philosophically but even to resurrect it. For this reason, it can be seen as scholarly inappropriate. However, Bellah and Masaryk along other theorists of the new religion have demonstrated that religiosity and religion are not spiritually independent matters but are deeply rooted in socio-historical contexts. Modern democratic regimes and the ideologies that support them cannot be fully understood without trying to understand their religious basis.

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55 Emilio Gentile, *Politická náboženství. Mezi náboženství a totalitarismem* (Brno: CDK, 2008).

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