Transformations in American Christianity and American Civil Religion
The 2013 Jarvis Lecture on Christianity and Culture, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, November 4, 2013

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What distinguishes American Christianity from European Christianity is the fact that it has never had the character of a confessional state church. By contrast, every branch of European Christianity underwent a similar process of state confessionalization in the Early Modern era, following the post-Reformation religious civil wars and the imposition of the Westphalian principle *cuius regio eius religio*.

This process of state-led confessionalization, which actually began in 1492 with the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from a new Catholic Spain, created religiously homogeneous societies throughout continental Europe, a homogeneously Protestant North, a homogeneously Catholic South and three bi-confessional societies in between, Holland, Germany and Switzerland, with their own patterns of internal territorial confessionalization, based on confessional "pillars," territories or cantons. Europe solved the problem of religious diversity through emigration, by expelling or by letting their religious minorities flee their home countries to find refuge first in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then overseas in the New World, particularly in the American colonies.

One could argue that implicit in the freedom, i.e. compulsion of religious minorities to emigrate was the emergence of the modern conception of religion as something which cannot be imposed or coerced and which individuals carry with them, in their private consciences. It is this modern sectarian and secular principle
which was to gain full institutionalization first in those American colonies, where
some of the radical Protestant sects, such as Quakers and Baptists, became
influential minorities, and eventually after independence in the entire United States
with the extension of the dual clause of the First Amendment, protecting the no
establishment of religion at the state level and the free exercise of religion in
society.

In contrast to European cities, eighteenth century American colonial towns,
already before independence, were characterized by a vibrant religious super-
diversity. This was true of New York and Philadelphia, as well as of Providence,
R.I. and Charleston, S.C. Moreover, even in the colonies which had established
churches such as Congregational Massachusetts or Anglican Virginia only the
elites belonged to the established church and therefore the majority of the
population never had confessional affiliations nor was territorialized into the parish
system. The churching of the American population took place after independence
through continuous immigration and through the revivalist conversions and
evangelical campaigns associated with the Second Great Awakening.

It is estimated that before independence less than 20 percent of the American
population belonged to churches or sects, that is, had any religious affiliation. By
the 1830’s, however, over 60 percent of the American population already belonged
to some religious denomination. Baptists, Methodists and Catholics, had been only
tiny minorities at the time of independence, each constituting approximately only 1 percent of the population. By the 1840s, however, the three had become by far the largest American denominations, many times the size of the old established colonial churches (Congregational, Anglican, and Presbyterian) and constituting already more than 50 percent of the population. But along with them there were already dozens if not hundreds of old European sects and new American denominations.

The name itself, *denomination*, as well as the system of religious denominationalism is an American invention which has no equivalent in any European language. In the various European languages the term denomination is usually translated either as confession, or as sect, but denomination actually has a radically new connotation, which is not captured by the old European concepts. Denomination is simply the name which I assume as the member of a voluntary religious association and the one by which I am recognized by others. Institutionally crucial is the fact that it is a system of mutual recognition of groups in society without state recognition or regulation. Indeed while American strangers typically tend to inquiry or to reveal to one another their religious denomination, the American government has no right to enquire or survey the religious denomination of its citizens.
Through continuous immigration the system of denominational pluralism which was at first an internal Protestant model has expanded to incorporate first all the religions of Europe and today all the religions of the world. Indeed one could venture to assume that there is no religion anywhere in the world which does not have some congregational presence in the United States. Moreover, it has been repeatedly observed by immigration scholars that immigrants today as much as in the 19th century tend to become more religious in America after immigration than they were in their home countries.

That means that religion in America is not a traditional residue called to disappear with progressive modernization, but is a modern response to the challenges confronting immigrant groups that have to find a space in a religiously diverse society. Immigrant religions are not simply traditional ethnic remnants but are actually creative transformations of religious resources in novel contexts. The various branches of English Protestantism were radically transformed in America and the same happened to immigrant Catholicism, to immigrant Judaism, and is happening today to immigrant Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Surveys of American religion reveal two persistent characteristics of the American religious system. The first is the high level of religious belief (over 90% of the population declare belief in God), the high level of religious affiliation (despite the significant growth of the non-religious in the last two decades, close to
80% of the American population still declare some religious denominational affiliation), and the high levels of individual and collective religious practice (70% pray regularly and close to 50% participate in congregational religious services at least once a month).

The second remarkable characteristic is the highly competitive and dynamic fluidity of American religious pluralism. According to the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Survey, more than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have switched their religious affiliation since childhood. If change in Protestant denominations is included, the number of adults who have switched their religious affiliation rises to 44 percent. This is a phenomenon totally incomprehensible in the European confessional context, where the only relevant change is unchurching and confessional secularization, not change in religious affiliation.

Two principles are central to American religious denominationalism: a) “Congregationalism”, that is, the principle of individual voluntary congregationl association of lay people, so that even religions which have no such congregational associational tradition, such as Catholicism, Hinduism or Buddhism, tend to adopt the form in the United States and b) the principle of formal equality of all denominations which tends to undermine the traditional European distinction between church and sect, as well as that between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, that
is, true and false religion, which is the principle upon which the system of Western Christendom had been based since the Constantinian establishment.

Of course, the power dynamics of majority-minority relations have always been operative in Christian Protestant America as evidenced by the prolonged nativist campaigns against “Romanism” or against “Mormonism” well into the twentieth century. But majoritarian Protestantism has been continuously undermined from within by its own fragmentation into myriad denominations constituted along ecclesiological-theological differences but also along class, ethnic and racial lines.

Indeed, it is the interlocking dynamics of racial and religious denominationalism which has always structured the character of group relations in American history. But while racial denominationalism in the past was structured along a rigid, hierarchical binary system segregating a large hegemonic and privileged white majority and the oppressed underprivileged black minority, the system of religious denominationalism has been based on a much more fluid, in principle egalitarian, super-diversity.

The new post-1965 immigration has contributed not only to an even greater pluralization of the existing religious diversity, but more importantly, coming as it did on the heels of the civil rights movement, to an increasing pluralization of the American system of racial denominationalism, undermining in the process the
binary black-white racial system. Today, the so-called “minorities” (Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, etc.) constitute already a majority of the population in every large American city. Moreover, today in 2013 for the first time in American history denominational Protestants constitute less than half of the American population.

As throughout American history, once again immigration since 1965 has been a major source of population growth and cultural change, bringing a major transformation not only to American Christianity but also to the American civil religion. Let me just mention first a few striking demographic facts, before entering into the discussion of civil religion. Over 30 million new immigrants have arrived in the United States since 1985, at a rate of over one million new immigrants per year. The proportion of foreign-born immigrants living in the United States has quadrupled from less than 10 million in 1970 to over 40 million today. In 2006 for instance the United States accepted more legal immigrants as permanent residents than all other countries in the world combined.

Contemporary immigrants tend to settle predominantly in seven states, California, New York, Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Illinois. Those seven states comprise about 44% of the U.S. population as a whole, while their combined total immigration constitutes 70% of the total foreign-born proportion. But increasingly the new immigrants tend to settle throughout the
United States. In fact, looking into the proportional change in foreign born population in the last decade of the past century, North Carolina had the fastest rate of growth, 273.7%, followed by Georgia with 233.4%.

More important than the increase in numbers, however, are the changes in the regions of origin and in the characteristics of the new immigrants. In comparison with the old immigrants, two characteristics of the new immigrants are most relevant. Firstly, they are primarily non-European, increasingly from all regions of the world, but predominantly from Asia and the Americas. Among the top ten sending countries in the last two decades, five are Latin American and five Asian in the following descending order: Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, South Korea, Dominican Republic and Guatemala. Secondly, in addition to the tremendous range in all forms of human diversity (racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic) which they bring, the new immigrants are also extremely diverse, almost bifurcated, in the levels of human and social capital, skills, and resources which they bring. Half of all foreign-born have much higher levels of education and income than the average American, while the other half have much lower levels.

From the particular perspective of my lecture, the most important characteristic is the extraordinary religious pluralism and diversity that they bring to a country that was already the most religiously diverse and pluralistic in
Since neither the U.S. Census, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (I.N.S.) nor any other government agency can gather information on the religious makeup of the population, we do not have reliable data on the denominational religious affiliation of the new immigrants. Attempts to extrapolate from the religious composition of the country of origin have to be sensitive to the fact that today, as always, religious minorities tend to immigrate to America in disproportionate numbers. Arab Christians and Russian Jews in the past, Korean Christians and Latino Protestants today, would be obvious examples.

In any case, it is safe to assume that the immense majority of all new immigrants, somewhere between two thirds and three fourths, depending upon the port of entry, are Christian, Protestant and Catholic in various proportions, with small numbers of Eastern Orthodox. In this respect, the most significant religious impact of the new immigrants is likely to be the replenishing and renovation of American Christianity. But since they bring non-European versions of Christianity, the new immigrants are contributing to the de-Europeanization of American Protestantism and American Catholicism. The Hispanization or Latin Americanization of American Catholicism is one of the most obvious and relevant trends. But it is accompanied by the no less significant trend of Protestantification of Latin America and of Latinos in the U.S. This transformation of American Christianity is in tune with the extraordinary transformation of global Christianity
outside of Europe, particularly in the global South, which Philip Jenkins has
denominated “the Next Christendom.”

But the most striking new development with extraordinary potential
repercussions, both national and global, is the arrival of increasing numbers of
Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, indeed of representatives of all world religions. The
numbers may not be as large as some of the exaggerated estimates one hears
floating around. The adherents of all non-Christian religions in the US combined
constitute probably no more than 10% of the American population, while the
foreign born share of the total American population today is just over 10%, well
below the figures around 1900 when the foreign born comprised over 20% of the
U.S. population.

In terms of numbers, American Jews never presented a real challenge to
Christian predominance, but the incorporation of Judaism as an American religion
radically transformed the American religious landscape and the self-definition of
the American nation, from Christian to Judeo-Christian. Even the perceived threat
posed by immigrant Catholicism was not primarily due to its size, but rather to the
fact that it was viewed as an un-American religion, insofar as Republicanism and
Romanism were defined as being incompatible.

American religious pluralism is expanding and incorporating all the world
religions in the same way as it previously incorporated the religions of the old
immigrants. A complex process of mutual accommodation is taking place. Like Catholicism and Judaism before, other world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism) are being Americanized, and in the process they are transforming American religion, while the religious diasporas in America are simultaneously serving as catalysts for the transformation of the old religions in their civilizational homes, in the same way as American Catholicism had an impact upon the transformation of world Catholicism and American Judaism contributed to the transformation of world Judaism. The United States is bound to become “the first new global society” made up of all world religions and civilizations, at a time when religious civilizational identities are regaining prominence at the global stage.

Indeed the most important transformation brought by the new immigrants is taking place in terms of a new redefinition of the American civil religion. A decade ago, in Public Religions in the Modern World I argued that from independence to the present, American Protestantism had gone through three consecutive processes of disestablishment. The “first disestablishment,” the constitutional one, constructed the still disputed “wall of separation” between the Protestant churches and the Federal state. It brought about the separation of the state from ecclesiastical institutions and the dissociation of the political community of citizens from any religious community. But the secularization of the state did
not bring in its wake either the decline or the privatization of religion.

On the contrary, by the time of Alexis de Tocqueville’s visit to the United States in 1830, at the end of the Second Great Awakening, evangelical Protestantism had become established de facto as the American civil religion, that is, as the public religion of American civil society. The convergence of the main Protestant denominations made possible the launching of a trans-denominational evangelical crusade to “Christianize” the people, the social order, and the republic. Indeed, under Andrew Jackson, the first “evangelical” president, the democratization of the aristocratic republic and the democratization of Christianity went hand in hand.

The “second disestablishment” cannot be traced back to one single event or to a series of events, but the final outcome is clear: the secularization of American higher education and the loss of Protestant cultural hegemony over the public sphere of American civil society and over the newly emerging large industrial urban centers in the Northeast and Midwest after the Civil War, where an increasingly divided Protestantism had to face the arrival of large new immigrant Catholic and Jewish majorities. Protestant fundamentalism emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as a modern anti-modernist reaction against the “second disestablishment.” It fought its battles on three fronts: against the liberal-modernist heresies within the northern evangelical denominations, against the
teaching of Darwinism in the public schools, and against “rum and Romanism” in urban America. Despite some Pyrrhic victories with Prohibition and the Scopes trial, the fundamentalists lost the main battles and retreated to their separate congregations in a self-imposed religious and cultural ghetto. Most intellectuals assumed that defeated fundamentalism had been relegated to the dustbin of history.

For a few more decades the Protestant ethic continued to dominate public morality, the American way of life and “the American self.” The New Deal, the welfare state, World War II, the Cold War and the post-World War II economic boom made possible the rapid assimilation of the non-Protestant immigrant population into “the American way of life.” By the mid-1950’s, Protestant-Catholic-Jew had become the three denominational forms of a renewed American civil religion that had the Protestant ethic and faith in America’s millennial role as its moral and doctrinal core. But the celebration of the new national consensus, symbolized in the election of the first Catholic president, did not last very long.

By the late 1960s, the counterculture, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement, and the Catholic aggiornamento all had contributed to putting the American civil religion on trial and there were numerous indications that a “third disestablishment,” the disestablishment of the Protestant ethic from the American way of life, was under way. From now on, “the American way of life” would be characterized by the plurality of ways of life, by
multiculturalism and by what could be called moral denominationalism. From the first to the third disestablishment, the interpretation of the First Amendment was progressively extended from the constitutional protection of the “free exercise of religion”; to freedom of inquiry, thought, and speech; to freedom of mores, that is, of conduct, exemplified above all in the new right to privacy and in the gender and sexual revolutions.

It is in reaction to this third disestablishment that Protestant fundamentalism reemerged publically and was reborn politically in the project of the Moral Majority and of the New Christian Right in 1979. But the very foundation of the Moral Majority as a trans-denominational Judeo-Christian coalition attempting to include, in Jerry Falwell’s words, “Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Mormons, Fundamentalists,” would seem to indicate that Falwell himself did not believe that the reestablishment of nineteenth-century Protestant hegemony was either desirable or possible. Only if such a majority of religious conservatives and “moral” Americans could be put together could the restoration of the Protestant ethic and of the American civil religion take place.

In 1978, one year before the emergence of the Moral majority, the historian William McLoughlin published his book, *Revivals, Awakening and Reforms*, his well-known interpretation of American history as a series of religious revivals, great awakenings and social reform movements. McLoughlin argued that the
United States found itself in the midst of its Fourth Great Awakening, but that no national consensus yet had been reached and its ultimate direction was still unclear. He wrote:

At some point in the future, clearly in the 1990’s at best, a consensus will emerge that will thrust into political leadership a president with a platform committed to the kinds of fundamental restructuring that have followed our previous awakenings – in 1776, in 1830, and in 1932.

He expected the new ideological reorientation to include “a new sense of the mystical unity of all mankind and of the vital power of harmony between man and nature” as well as “some form of Judeo-Christian socialism” as the new political ideology. It is obvious that McLouglin was not anticipating the triumph of the Republican Christian Fundamentalist coalition two years later that brought President Ronald Reagan to the White House.

The question we may want to ask today is whether the triumph of the Republican Christian Evangelical coalition that gained expression with the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush Jr. represents the consolidation of a new hegemonic Evangelical establishment or rather was just a temporary cultural backlash against what I call the third disestablishment. We could reframe the question by asking, what are the contours of the newly transformed American civil religion?

The modern concept of “civil religion” as first proposed by Rousseau at the
end of *The Social Contract* is related to the transformation of the modern absolutist state, of the modern Leviathan, from monarchic to popular or national sovereignty. The problem faced by Rousseau was the search for the adequate kind of civil religion which would serve to ground the new popular democratic republican sovereignty, that is, the new *demos*, “*We, the People.*” The problem has two different dimensions. One is the democratization of sovereignty, but related with it is the equally significant dimension of the secularization of sovereignty, namely the de-confessionalization of the state.

Against thinkers like Pierre Bayle who claimed that religion could be of no use to the body politic, Rousseau insisted on the need for a civil religion to buttress a republican democratic government since he argued that no state had ever be founded in history without a religious base. The question for Rousseau was how to disestablish ecclesiastical confessional religion and replace it with a civil secular religion.

When Robert Bellah reintroduced the concept of “civil religion” in his 1966 seminal essay “Civil Religion in America” he implied that the United States had found its own solution to Rousseau’s problem claiming that “few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America.” (*Beyond Belief*, p.168). Unlike in Europe where one finds either a fusion between
the national state church and the civil religion, as is the case in Nordic Lutheran countries, or the development of a laicist civil religion in contraposition to the national Catholic Church, as is the case in France, Bellah argued that in the case of the United States the civil religion conceived by such founding fathers as Washington, Jefferson or Franklin, was never “felt to be a substitute for Christianity” even though there was a “quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity.” (p. 176). For Bellah, “under the doctrine of religious liberty, an exceptionally wide sphere of personal piety and voluntary social action was left to the churches. But the churches were neither to control the state nor to be controlled by it.”

As is well known, Bellah traces the contours and the transformation of civil religion in America through an analysis of presidential inaugural addresses from the First Inaugural Address of President Washington through Lincoln’s Inaugural Address and Gettysburg’s Address to President Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society addresses.

A look at the Inaugural Addresses of Presidents Reagan and Bush seem to point to a restoration of the 19th century post-millennial Evangelical Protestant vision that America is a City on a Hill, the redeemer nation that is building the Kingdom of God at home and abroad. President Reagan’s first inaugural address referred to the United States as “this last and greatest bastion of freedom” and “the
exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.” He reiterated that “we are a nation under God” and pointed beyond the shrines to the Founding Fathers across the Potomac to Arlington National Cemetery and its “row upon row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David,” reminding everybody that we are a Judeo-Christian nation.

In his second inaugural address President Reagan, as an older American, remembered “a time when people of different race, creed, or ethnic origin in our land found hatred and prejudice installed in social custom and, yes, in law,” contrasting it with “the progress that we have made toward the ‘brotherhood of man’ that God intended for us,” as a way of acknowledging, but only implicitly without any particular reference to Martin Luther King or other African American leaders, the achievements brought by the civil rights movement. The echoes of the past he explicitly remembered were “the hard snow of Valley Forge,” President Lincoln’s lonely resolve “to preserve the Union,” “the men of the Alamo,” and “a settler pushes West.”

President Bush’s first inaugural address made more explicit reference to the connection between America’s history and God’s providential plans for humanity, pointing out that the theme of every inaugural ceremony since Jefferson has been “our nation’s grand story of courage and its simple dream of dignity,” immediately adding that “we are not this story’s author, who fills time and eternity with his
purpose” and referring to a letter from Virginia statesman John Page to Thomas Jefferson, ending with the words, “This work continues. This story goes on. And an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs his storm.” Additionally, President Bush in anticipating his “faith-based initiative” made explicit reference to “church and charity, synagogue and mosque,” as if implying that we were moving from a Judeo-Christian to an Abrahamic conception of the nation and of civil religion.

President Bush’s second inaugural address, while stating the ambitious interventionist “policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world,” reiterated a new Abrahamic conception of the nation by indicating that our national life is sustained “by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people.”

It is in the inaugural addresses of President Obama that one can see more clearly in my view the contours of the newly transformed American civil religion, one that reflects the demographic and socio-cultural transformations of American society since the 1960’s and our new global and environmental consciousness. The first inaugural address reiterated “that noble idea passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” Notice the emphasis on equality
not only on freedom.

Emphasizing that “our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness,” President Obama went on to redefine the national civil religion by affirming that “we are a nation of Christian and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers,” expanding beyond the conception of an Abrahamic nation to include for the first time in an inaugural address not only Hindus, as representatives of a non-monotheistic world religion, but even more significantly “non-believers” thus acknowledging all those without religious denomination who in fact represent the fastest growing sector in our self-denominational secular-religious market.

In a self-referential indication of the crucial transformation brought by the confluence of the civil rights movement, the feminist gender revolution and the immigrant demographic transformation, and to the new majority coalition that elected him, President Obama added:

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed, why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall; and why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served in a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.

The second inaugural address made the themes of the gender and racial expansion of the national covenant even more explicit by stating that “we are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free,
and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.”

President Obama then went to expand the definition of “We, the people” by declaring that

the most evident of truths – that all of us are created equal – is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall… to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth

and he continued:

For our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law…Our journey is not complete until we find a better way to welcome the striving, hopeful immigrants who still see America as a land of opportunity.

One could perhaps think that inaugural addresses are just words, or even more cynically that Obama’s words were just an acknowledgment of the new moral majority made up of young people, women, racial and religious minorities, and new immigrants who had reelected him. I happen to believe that Bellah was basically right when he argued that presidential inaugural addresses were expressions and manifestations of the continuous reformulation of an American civil religion and that irrespective of the way in which history might judge the achievements and failures of the Obama presidency, his inaugural addresses point clearly in the direction of the new national moral consensus anticipated by
McLoughlin. If my analysis is correct such an emerging consensus points in the direction not of the hegemonic establishment of the Christian Evangelical Moral majority, but rather in the direction of what I have called the third Protestant disestablishment and the formation of a new post-Protestant moral majority based on a more pluralist moral denominationalism.