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Civil Religion and Identity in America

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree in Language and Culture**

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to myself.

We did it, Omayma.

-Omayma-

Dedication

In the name of Allah, grateful to him for everything he gave me to complete this piece of work.

I dedicate this work to myself, for the patience, the sacrifices, and the big efforts. May Allah protect me. To my great mother, to my little family that believed in me. Without forgetting my love partner.

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Abstract

The United States is known for its remarkable religious diversity, which sometimes presents a unique challenge to the nation's sense of collective identity. The constitutional principle of religious freedom, protected by the First Amendment, guarantees every religious group the right to worship freely and to proselytize, while forbidding the establishment of any official religion. This absence of an established religion fosters pluralism but also complicates efforts to define a unified or homogeneous religious identity that can represent all Americans. The interaction between different religious sensitivities has often led to the exclusion of certain groups and caused conflicts and social tensions, which have also challenged social harmony and complicated the ongoing process of building a shared national identity. In light of this challenge, some scholars argue that the real religion that unites all Americans is not any single faith tradition but rather a civil religion that contains a shared set of values, rituals, and symbols that transcend specific religious denominations and create a common sense of belonging, unity, and national identity. This study explores how the concept of civil religion has been used to address the challenges of religious diversity and identity in America. Through historical and conceptual analysis, this research aims to examine how civil religion continues to shape American identity by providing a symbolic and moral framework capable of integrating diverse religious communities within the nation.

Keywords: Religious Diversity, First Amendment, Pluralism, Identity, Civil Religion, Unity.

ملخص

تُعرف الولايات المتحدة بتنوعها الديني الكبير، مما يشكل أحياناً تحدياً فريداً للهوية الجماعية للأمة الأمريكية. إن مبادئ الحرية الدينية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية و التي يجسدها التعديل الأول للدستور تكفل لكل جماعة دينية الحق في ممارسة شعائرها بحرية ونشر معتقداتها، مع حظر تأسيس أي دين رسمي للدولة، مما يعزز مبدأ التعددية، لكنه في الوقت ذاته يصعب تحديد هوية دينية موحدة أو متجانسة يمكن أن تمثل جميع الأمريكيين. وقد أدت التفاعلات بين الحساسيات الدينية المختلفة إلى التمييز ضد بعض الجماعات ونشوء صراعات وتوترات اجتماعية، مما شكل تحدياً للوئام المجتمعي وأعاق المسار المستمر نحو بناء هوية وطنية مشتركة. وفي مواجهة هذا التحدي، يرى بعض الباحثين أن الدين الذي يوحد الأمريكيين ليس ديانة محددة بعينها، بل هو 'دين مدني' يتضمن مجموعة من القيم والطقوس والرموز المشتركة التي تتجاوز الانتماءات الدينية التقليدية، وتُرسخ شعوراً عاماً بالانتماء والوحدة والهوية الوطنية. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيفية توظيف مفهوم 'الدين المدني' لمواجهة تحديات التنوع الديني والهوية في أمريكا. ومن خلال تحليل تاريخي ومفاهيمي، تهدف الدراسة إلى توضيح كيفية استمرار الدين المدني في تشكيل الهوية الأمريكية من خلال تقديم إطار رمزي وأخلاقي قادر على دمج الجماعات الدينية المتنوعة داخل المجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنوع الديني، التعديل الأول، التعددية، الهوية، الدين المدني، الوحدة.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

9/11	September 9, 2001
ACR	American Civil Religion
CR	Civil Religion
CRA	Civil Rights Act
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
RFRA	Religious Freedom Restoration Act
USA	United States of America
WASP	White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

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Introduction

American identity has developed into a more complicated issue due to the increase in religious diversity within the country. Numerous groups with various belief systems, traditions, and cultures reside in the most diverse country in the world, continuously transforming and challenging what it means to be an American. The diversity of religions may lead to tensions and conflicts between groups, posing challenges for faith groups and governments regarding social cohesion and national identity.

The coexistence of multiple religions in the United States, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American traditions, is achieved under a model of religious pluralism, which celebrates and encourages religious freedom and diversity. This pluralism has created an environment of harmony and respect but also poses important questions about belonging, national values, and shared identity.

Historians and scholars have long discussed and debated the role of religion in American identity, its place in society, the impact of religious diversity on identity and social cohesion, and the most appropriate depiction of the American religious landscape, which remains a complicated subject due to the changes in the American religious environment.

In the context of debating America's religious identity in light of the increasingly diverse religious environment, a new concept called 'civil religion' was developed during the 1960s, arguing that civil religion is the real religion of Americans. It is used to describe patriotism, national identity, and national morality and serves as a way to reunite the nation under mutual social understandings.

This study examines the challenge posed by the wild religious diversity in America to the nation's sense of identity and explores the notion of civil religion, highlighting the way it has been used to address this challenge. The fact that there is no established religion in the United States gives freedom to every religious group to worship and proselytize, but it makes it hard to talk about a unified or even homogeneous religious identity in the country. This has pushed some scholars to argue that America's real religion, which connects all Americans and gives them a sense of shared identity, belonging, and unity, is a common set of values, rituals, slogans, and symbols, often referred to as 'civil religion.'

The thesis begins by surveying the current American religious landscape, shedding light on the many religious groups that make up the U.S., the most religiously diverse nation in the world today. It then delves into the historical evolution of religion, from early encounters between Native American traditions and European settlers to later waves of immigration. The study also addresses how the U.S. has responded to this diversity through laws, policies, and initiatives to manage religious life, foster coexistence, and maintain peace and unity.

Additionally, the study investigates how American identity emerged as a contested issue in light of the wide religious diversity within the United States. It focuses on two historical paradigms that have shaped conceptions of national religious belonging: the WASP identity and the Judeo-Christian tradition. These paradigms have long influenced ideas about who is considered to be part of the religious fabric of the nation. The study also sheds light on the place of Islam in American society, which continues to face exclusion from dominant frameworks.

The research examines the role of civil religion as a unifying force in American society. It explores how the founding fathers used elements of what came to be termed civil religion to promote national cohesion among a population with diverse religious beliefs and how the concept has evolved over time. The study also analyzes the principles, symbols and rituals that have been essential to the development of a shared civic identity.

In order to conduct this study, the core of this thesis is written based on findings drawn from a set of primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, web articles, and reports that best serve the topic. In the reading and data collection, the research focuses on works that examine the concept of civil religion and its role in unifying American people under a shared civic identity in the absence of an established religion.

One of the main references used in this research is Robert N. Bellah's seminal article, "Civil Religion in America," published in *Daedalus* in 1967. In this influential work, Bellah introduced the concept of civil religion into sociological debates. He argues that the true religion that unites Americans is not any single faith tradition but rather a civil religion composed of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that function much like those of traditional religions.

Following the widespread debates and criticism of his original 1967 article on civil religion, Robert Bellah revisited the concept in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1975, Seabury Press). He acknowledges the limitations of civil religion and argues that its functions include both national integration and division.

The book by Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, published in 2004 by Simon & Schuster, examines the evolving nature of

American national identity and the centrality of the WASP tradition. Huntington argues that the United States was originally founded on an Anglo-Protestant culture, characterized by Protestant religious values. However, he contends that recent developments, such as increased immigration and the rise of multiculturalism, have weakened the WASP tradition and can no longer serve to address the full extent of religious diversity.

This work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a general overview of religious diversity in the U.S. It presents different estimates of religious affiliation and highlights the wide range of beliefs present across the nation. America is home to tens of religious traditions, shaped by its long history of immigration and conversion. Although a wide variety of faiths are practiced, the most prominent include Christianity, which remains the majority religion, followed by Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

The chapter delves into the history of religion in America, showing how different religious groups found their way to the New World and established their beliefs and practices. It explores the early colonization period when European settlers brought their own religious traditions to America. It also sheds light on Native American religions that existed before the arrival of Europeans and the efforts to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity. Furthermore, it examines the arrival of other religious traditions that grew after the Nationality Act of 1965, which opened the door for increased immigration from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, leading to the expansion of religions.

The chapter also delves into the management of religious diversity in the United States. It briefly mentions the various laws and policies enacted to organize religious life and ensure

freedom of belief across the country. It discusses the legal framework and interfaith dialogue that aim to protect religious freedom, promote mutual understanding, and foster coexistence among different religious communities.

The second chapter explores the complex challenge that religious diversity poses to the formation of a unified American identity. It investigates how the problem of identity has been addressed in light of such diversity. The chapter focuses on the early settlers of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) origin who played a central role in shaping American identity. It emphasizes the influence of Protestants, particularly the Puritans, who brought with them religious values that shaped the nation's culture, politics, and moral vision. Their beliefs in hard work, individualism, and a sense of divine mission deeply influenced the early foundations of American society.

The chapter also examines the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition as a means to create a more inclusive American identity. It shows how politicians linked Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism together to present a unified set of religious and moral values. The chapter explores how this concept evolved as a political construct, designed to foster a sense of unity during times of crisis.

The chapter also explores the limitations of the framework called the Judeo-Christian tradition in providing a full sense of American identity. It argues that this framework is not fully accurate because it excludes many religious groups, particularly Muslims. The chapter highlights how Muslims, despite their deep historical and contemporary ties to America, have often been portrayed as outsiders from this paradigm.

Chapter three explores the concept of civil religion, which addresses the challenges of religious diversity and identity in America, focusing on its historical roots, key figures, and the shared symbols, values, and rituals such as the flag, the Constitution, national holidays, and references to God that bind all Americans together. It also examines the role of civil religion in unifying all the diverse American population by providing a common moral framework and national identity that transcends individual religious affiliations.

Civil religion can be described as a quasi-religion that unites a people under the same laws and rules and provides a sense of inclusion, belonging, identity, unity and structure, worth, confidence, transcendence, and purpose. Civil religion can be found in the beliefs and rhetoric of the Founding Fathers and former presidents of the United States. This ideology and its components have played a crucial role in the development and legitimization of American institutions.

Lastly, Chapter Three provides insights into the debate and criticism surrounding civil religion in America. It begins with Bellah's analysis, which highlights civil religion as a source of social integration and division. It also addresses critiques from other scholars who argue that civil religion should be replaced by nationalism, and its foundations are closely tied to the legacy of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) tradition, which raises concerns about its inclusivity.

Chapter One

An Overview of Religious Diversity in America

It is undeniable that religion has played a significant role in the founding and growth of the United States. Since colonial times, the country has been a nation of diversity, with a wide range of groups from various regions of the world coming to the new land in search of religious freedom from persecution and new opportunities for a better life.

The freedom of religion and the legal protections were essential to ensure that all of these different groups could live in harmony in one united nation. This chapter explores the religious landscape of the United States, tracing its historical roots and the variety of religious communities that exist in the country. Additionally, it examines the evolution of religious pluralism over time, highlighting how different faith traditions have interacted, adapted, and coexisted.

1.1. The American Religious Landscape

The American religious landscape has been marked by a continuously growing diversity. What used to be a Protestant nation has transformed into a nation of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and a mosaic of religious traditions. The rise of non-Christian faiths like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, along with increasing numbers of Americans identifying as non-religious, has further contributed to the diversity of American religion (Chaves 22).

A recent Gallup report indicates that 68% of Americans identified as Christians in 2023. However, the country is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of religious affiliation, with significant growth in non-Christian religions, which now account for 7% of the population.

This category includes Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, besides smaller religious groups. The survey also shows rapid growth in the share of Americans who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or simply nothing in particular. This fast-growing group is often called the religious nones; they make up 22% of the US population, which is around 74 million people (“How Religious Are Americans?”).

The United States has become home to a diverse religious community due to various waves of immigration from all parts of the world. Immigrants brought their religious beliefs and practices with them. They built their own communities and places of worship that reflected their faith. However, many religions are practiced in the country, but the most popular ones are the three Abrahamic faiths; Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Besides other religions which are Hinduism, and Buddhism.

1.1.1. The Abrahamic Religions

Christianity is the dominant religion in America, with Protestants and Catholics constituting the majority (Neusner 2). The percentage of U.S. adults who identify as Christians is 68%, equating to 231 million individuals, including 33% of the ones who are Protestants (112 million), 22% who are Catholics (74 million), and 2% who are Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), in addition to other Christian denominations such as Latter Day Saints, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Oriental Orthodox Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses (“How Religious Are Americans?”).

Geographically, Christianity is widely spread across all parts of the United States. However, different denominations are concentrated in various regions due to historical settlement and immigration. Protestantism is the most prevalent Christian denomination in the country; the most Protestant states are all in the South, led by Alabama and Mississippi, with 77% and 75% Protestant identification, followed by Arkansas and Tennessee with 72% and 71%. Other states with 70% or lower Protestant residents include South Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia.

Catholicism, on the other hand, is the second largest Christian denomination and is concentrated in the East and Midwest. Rhode Island 44%, New Jersey 40%, Massachusetts 38%, and New York 38%, in addition to New Hampshire, Illinois, and New Mexico 30%. Moreover, the Mormon population is located in the western U.S, particularly in Utah, where half of individuals 50% identify as Mormon (“The Religiously Distinct States of America”).

Christian beliefs are based on the Bible, which includes both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as on the tradition of the Church. Christians gather in churches, which are sacred places where they pray, worship, and participate in religious ceremonies (Hemeyer). Today, there are between 350,000 to 400,000 churches in the U.S. The largest segment consists of a wide range of Protestants, with the denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Methodist Church being among the most prominent. There are also a sizable number of Roman Catholic churches, as well as other Christian denominations such as the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches. Each church serves as a unique community (Burge).

Although Christianity remains the dominant religion in America, it has declined in recent decades. People identifying as Christians have decreased from 90% of the U.S. population in 1972 to 68% in 2023. Many younger adults are switching out of Christianity and identifying as atheists, agnostics, or simply nothing in particular, shifting instead toward secular lifestyle. Because they hold that one does not need to be a member of a church to exhibit moral, ethical, and virtuous behavior (“How U.S. religious composition..”).

Judaism is the second largest religion in the U.S. Estimates of the U.S. Jewish population have varied widely. However, according to a Gallup survey conducted in 2023, Judaism is recognized as the second largest religion in America, with around 6 million Jews, representing 2% of the total population. Within American Judaism, there are a number of branches, such as Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative, among others (“How Religious Are Americans?”). Reform Judaism is the largest branch in the U.S., comprising 37% of the Jewish population, followed by Conservative 17% and Orthodox 9% (Mitchell).

Jewish communities established numerous houses of worship, known as synagogues, which serve as central institutions in American Jewish life. In 1850, there were 37 congregations, increasing to thousands over time (Schwartz et al. 112). Today, there are around 2,919 synagogues across the country, spread throughout various states, with the highest concentrations in New York, California, and New Jersey. These synagogues are depicted as sites for prayer, education, and communal gathering; it is a space for American Jews to come together, celebrate holidays, and maintain their cultural heritage (“List of Synagogues in United States”).

The Jewish population is often concentrated in the Northeast, with considerable communities in the South and the West. According to a study published by demographers and sociologists Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky in the American Jewish Yearbook, the distribution of the Jewish population in 2024 showed significant concentrations in several states. New York had the highest percentage with 9%, followed by Washington 8%. New Jersey 6%, Massachusetts 5%. Both Maryland and Connecticut had 4% Jewish populations, while Florida and California each had 3% (“American Jews”).

Islam is considered as the third largest religion in the U.S. and the fastest-growing among the Abrahamic faiths. However, due to the lack of official population statistics on religious affiliation in the United States, estimates of the Muslim population vary depending on survey methodologies (“Muslim Americans”). As reported by Gallup, Muslims comprise 1% of the US population, nearly the same as Hinduism and Buddhism, with around three million Muslims living in the country (“How Religious Are Americans?”). However, their numbers are projected to grow in the coming decades, making Islam the second largest religion in the country (Prothero 14).

Muslims are the most diverse faith community in America. They come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds; about one-fifth have come from Africa and another fifth from the Middle East. Others have arrived from nearly every country around the world. 30% of Muslim Americans identify as white, 23% as black, 21% as Asian, 6% as Hispanic, and 19% as other or mixed race (Hemeyer). The American Muslim community consists of five major sects. Half identify with Sunni Islam, the largest Muslim tradition. An additional 16%

identify with Shia Islam, which is the second largest Muslim tradition, with the remainder identifying with other sects (“Muslim Americans”).

Meanwhile, the Muslim population is largely concentrated in the Northeastern, Midwest and Southern states. New York, California, and Illinois are the states hosting the most considerable Muslim populations. These three states form the top rank, each maintaining a Muslim population of over 400,000. Following these three is New Jersey, hosting 321,652 members of the Muslim community; then comes Texas with 313,209. Michigan is next, with a Muslim population count of 241,828. Furthermore, Maryland and Virginia have 188,914, and 169,371 Muslims each. Pennsylvania and Massachusetts complete the top ten with a Muslim populations of 149,561 and 131,749 (“Muslim Population by State”).

Muslim communities have established numerous Islamic centers and mosques across all states; there are 3,000 mosques, Islamic centers, and other prayer locations in the United States, along with 300 Muslim schools and six Muslim colleges. The mosque, from the Arabic word Masjid, is a holy place in which Muslims worship God. It serves as a center where traditional Islamic teachings are studied, disseminated, and promoted. American Muslims go to the mosque to learn more about their religion and to memorize and recite the Qur'an (Hemeyer).

In the United States, the Muslim community has grown from three very different roots. Muslim slaves were brought involuntarily from Africa, immigrant Muslims have come voluntarily in search of a better life, and there are also American converts to Islam (Hemeyer). It is believed that 10% to 20% of the slaves brought to colonial America from West Africa

were Muslims. However, it was very difficult for them to adhere to their religion, and many were forcibly converted to Christianity and any efforts to practice Islam and maintain traditional clothing and names alive had to be done in secret (Harvey and Blum 366).

African American Muslims, who make up approximately one-quarter of the U.S. Muslim population, are growing at a fast rate for a number of reasons, including a high conversion rate in prisons, African-American political movements with an Islamic element, and the recovery of Islamic identity dating back to the time of slavery. Many African Americans today are converting to Islam as a means of reidentifying with their African heritage (Djupe and Olson 219).

In addition to the Abrahamic faiths, other religious traditions also exist and contribute to the rich diversity of the American religious landscape. Among these, Hinduism and Buddhism are the most prominent.

1.1.2. Other Religions

In the United States, Hinduism is a religion that has experienced rapid growth due to immigration from South Asian nations, mostly India. There are about three million Hindus, representing 1% of the U.S. population, living in various states across the country; California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois are home to the largest Hindu communities. However, instead of being a singular, overarching body of doctrine. American Hinduism encompasses a wide variety of beliefs, rituals, and traditions (“Hinduism in the United States”).

Hindu practices and traditions have had a significant cultural and social influence in the United States. Many Americans now practice yoga and meditation, and celebrate Hindu festivals like Diwali in schools and communities. American Hindus established temples and religious groups as part of their dedicated efforts to build community networks. These places of worship serve as foundations for preserving and advancing ethnic identities.

For American Hindus, the temple is a place to pray, as worship is an important daily practice that expresses love and devotion to their gods. The temple is also a special center that serves multiple roles in their lives. It provides a space where community members can share traditional ethnic cuisine, build social support networks, offer each other help and companionship, and educate and teach the language and religious scriptures. Moreover, the temple is a cultural center for celebrating important festivals and events, bringing people together to maintain and strengthen their cultural and religious heritage (Lucia).

Since Hinduism has so many gods, it is not possible for every temple to have a statue of each one. This means that statues of many popular gods, including Ganesha, Shiva, and Vishnu, are found in each temple ("Places of Worship"). Today, the number of Hindu temples in the U.S. has increased from 435 to 1000, spread across several states, with the majority concentrated on the East Coast, especially in New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Florida (Sharma).

Buddhism, on the other hand, is also an influential and growing religion in the U.S. According to the latest estimation in 2023, 1% of Americans identify as Buddhist, and they are spread out across the country, with 40% of them living in Southern California. Hawaii

also has the largest percentage of Buddhists with 8% of the population, followed by California with 2%. A few other states, such as New York, Illinois, Arizona, Colorado, and Washington, have 1% or less Buddhists (“Buddhism in USA”).

As Buddhism spread throughout America, its adherents established houses of worship to uphold their customs, engage in religious activities, and foster a sense of community. Today, there are 2,585 Buddhist temples across the country, with cities like Houston and Los Angeles having the highest numbers (“How Many Buddhist..”).

A temple is an essential place that enables the Buddhist community to congregate for prayer, learning, and meditation. There are common features seen in all Buddhist American temples. The main hall, which contains a Buddha statue; it is where Buddhists gather for practice and engage in rituals. A meditation hall is central to Buddhists because it provides a quiet environment in which they can concentrate and reach a higher state of awareness. Additionally, a study hall is dedicated to education, meetings, and lectures, where individuals learn about teachings, scriptures, and meditation techniques (Yates).

Buddhism is a religion with around three million followers in the United States, including Asian Americans who have historically practiced the faith and non-Asian converts who have adopted it. The U.S. offers a vastly different environment for Buddhists, leading to a unique history and an ongoing process of development as Buddhism and America come to converge with one another.

According to scholar Charles Prebish, the social phenomenon of Buddhism in America today is comprised of three broad categories. ‘Immigrant’ or ‘ethnic Buddhism’ is the oldest and largest of these; it refers to Buddhist traditions that came to America along with immigrants who were already believers and have largely remained within their communities and descendants. The next well known category is ‘import Buddhism’ signifies Americans who are interested in converting to Buddhism and actively seek it out, either by traveling abroad or by supporting foreign teachers; this form is also known as ‘elite Buddhism’ because its practitioners, often from privileged backgrounds and social elites.

The third category and the most recent trend in Buddhism is ‘export’ or ‘evangelical Buddhism.’ This refers to Buddhist organizations that have their roots abroad but actively recruit members in America. Unlike import Buddhism, where Americans seek out the faith themselves, export Buddhism is disseminated through organized efforts to attract adherents from various backgrounds. By far the most successful of these has been Soka Gakkai, a modern Buddhist movement from Japan, which focuses on spreading Buddhist teachings and encouraging people to convert (“Buddhism in America”).

Overall, the current religious landscape in the United States is the product of a long history of immigration and religious conversion. The growth of religion in the New World was influenced by the diverse Christian traditions brought during the early colonial period by European settlers. Over time, waves of immigrants from different parts of the world introduced new faiths and traditions, including Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, further enriching the nation's religious diversity.

1.2. The History of Religion in the United States

In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, unlocking what Europeans rapidly came to call the 'New World.' Columbus encountered land with nearly two million inhabitants that had previously been unfamiliar to Europeans. He believed he had discovered a different path to the East, which led him to mistakenly name these people 'Indians.' Over the next few centuries, European nations colonized the Americas in search of new land and trade opportunities. The Spanish and Portuguese established colonies over large areas of South America, whereas other European colonial powers, such as English explorers, concentrated on establishing settlements in North America (Byrd and Beumler 1).

1.2.1. Pre-Columbian Spiritual Traditions

Before the Europeans arrived to settle on the continent, various tribal groups of indigenous people had their own belief systems. These beliefs were rich with many spiritual and symbolic narratives derived from Nature, such as fire, water, the earth, the sky, the seasons, weather, plants, and animals. Each tribe possessed creation stories, though the content varied among them. They all believed in a universal 'Great Spirit' and maintained a strong connection to the Earth (Harvey and Blum 69).

Native American cultures are diverse and unique; each group sees itself differently from its neighbors. They speak different languages and have distinctive houses and styles of clothing. Every tribe or nation also has specific rules about marriage and family structure. Some tribes are patrilineal, meaning family identity is passed down through the father's side like taking the father's last name. Many others are matrilineal, where family identity comes

from the mother's side, and the lineage continues through women, mothers, daughters, granddaughters.

All of these many cultures tell their own stories, perform their own rituals, and have ritual leaders or sometimes called medicine societies. These traditions and customs make each of these cultures distinctive. However, while there are many Native American languages, none of them are written. Native American tribal traditions are composed of stories told orally by one person to others and of rituals passed from one generation to the next (Neusner 12).

1.2.2. The Colonial Era and the Rise of Christianity

Religion in Colonial America was dominant by Christianity although Judaism was practiced in small communities. The history of Christianity in America is a rich tapestry of diverse threads from various denominations. Christianity was introduced in U.S. during the period of European colonization. The Spanish and French brought Catholicism to the colonies of New Spain and New France, while British brought Protestantism. Among Protestants, adherents to Anglicanism, the Baptist Church, Calvinism, Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, Quakerism, Anabaptism, Methodism, and Moravian Church were the first to settle in the American colonies.

Christianity came to the U.S. with the early European settlers. The first successful English colony, Jamestown which established in 1607, had Anglican roots. The Pilgrims, who settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, sought religious freedom from the Church of England. Other colonies like Massachusetts Bay Colony, were founded by Puritans seeking to establish deeply religious communities. Furthermore, the variety of Christian denominations

increased with the expansion of the American colonies. Behind Puritans and Anglicans, denominations such as Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers gained prominence and each of them have brought its own theological perspectives and organizational structures (Pastorihu).

In fact, when the European settlements came up, some of them started to intentionally promote Christianity among Native Americans. In Puritan Massachusetts, John Eliot mastered the Algonkian language and translated the Bible into it in 1663, encouraging Natives to become missionaries themselves. Their relationship was marked by conflict over land; the European settlers often claimed Native territories, and then the native peoples were removed from the lands they had occupied, displaced to other lands. However, some colonial settlers, on the other hand like the Pilgrims on Plymouth, had positive relations with Native peoples (“First Encounters..”).

1.2.3. Waves of Immigration and Religious Expansion

The first Jews who came to the U.S. were composed of Sephardi immigrants from Brazil who arrived in New Amsterdam (later New York) in 1654 because of religious intolerance. After settling in New Amsterdam, the Jews established their first institutions, specifically religious ones, such as synagogues, schools, charitable societies, and cemeteries (Harvey and Blum 339).

However, the growth of American Jews when many German Jews arrived in the middle of the 19th century. In this period, many German Jews migrated to the United States due to

political instability, economic hardship, and rising anti-Semitism in Europe. They situated themselves across the country and settled in both cities and smaller towns. They adapted quickly to their new environment and engaged in commerce by opening shops and small businesses. Jewish immigrants also maintained the Jews' traditions; they formed communities and built synagogues and schools, thus enhancing Jews' communal life in America ("Jews in America ").

Another significant religion that expanded in the U.S. is Islam. The slave trade was responsible for the first wave of Muslims to America between the mid-1500s and the mid-1800s. The second wave of Muslims to America immigrated at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, primarily from Lebanon and Syria. The third wave of Muslims to America began in the 1960s and ran through the end of the 20th century, with Muslims coming from all parts of the Islamic world (Djupe and Olson 219).

Hinduism first came to the United States through the American imagination, i.e., through books, lectures, and ideas that interested Americans, especially teachings about the unity of the soul (*Ātman*) and the universe (*Brahman*). In the 20th century, increasing populations of Indian Hindus immigrated to the U.S. These Hindus were interested in developing followings among white audiences. They were families concerned about maintaining their cultural and religious traditions. They came from diverse regions of India, and they brought their regional practices and beliefs with them. After the 1965 Immigration Act, Indian Hindus brought more traditional practices and led to the establishment of temples and cultural centers across the country (Lucia).

Buddhism also began to spread in America with the first Buddhists being Chinese and Japanese immigrants who found work in the West, especially in California and Hawaii. In 1899, Japanese American Buddhists, with the help of missionary priests from Japan, established the first Buddhist institution in the U.S., the Buddhist Churches of America. Immigration restrictions in the late 1800s limited the growth of the East Asian population in America, but teachers of Buddhism from Japan began to visit the U.S. in the early 20th century, including the scholar of Zen, D. T. Suzuki, and the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki. A few Buddhist teachers from Japan and Southeast Asia also came to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893.

With the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Buddhists from other Asian countries were allowed to immigrate to America. Buddhists from Southeast Asia fled war-torn Vietnam and surrounding nations, bringing with them both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism which are two of the three main forms of Buddhism (Djupe and Olson 66).

The year 1965 marks a crucial turning point in immigration history of the United States, because of the passage of the immigration and nationality act, the country opened its doors to individuals from all parts of the world, which resulted in increased immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America ("U.S. Immigration since 1965").

1.3. Managing Religious Diversity in the United States

The United States has become one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. Numerous religious traditions were brought to the US by waves of immigrants from European nations who were seeking religious freedom and economic opportunities at the beginning of

the 17th century. Yet, when the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965, a huge number of immigrants came to the country from all over the world. This wave of immigration brought new religious traditions, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and others, which have become deeply rooted in American society.

America today is a multi-religious reality where diverse religious traditions coexist side by side. The nation has become a home to numerous mosques, Islamic centers, Hindu temples, Christian churches, Buddhist synagogues from every tradition of Asia and new Euro-American Buddhist communities. In addition to Sikh gurdwaras, Jain temple, Zoroastrian center, and a number of Baha'i groups ("a New Multi-Religious America").

However, in America there are a set of laws, policies, and standards that promote tolerance and foster understanding among different religious communities. These measures are centered around the model of religious pluralism, which encourages religious freedom and the coexistence of multiple faiths. That is, each religion is accepted as legitimate and provided equal opportunity to flourish without any form of prejudice on the part of the government (Asadu et al. 1-2).

1.3.1. The Legal Framework

The United States upholds religious freedom to manage and organize religious life in the country through strict laws and principles that are enshrined in the text of the Constitution's Bill of Rights and reinforced in other sources of federal legislation (Cohen and Numbers 4).

From colonial times to the present day, religious liberty in America has been a fundamental right of American society and its politics. Thomas Jefferson's well-known "wall of separation" metaphor has protected religious freedom from state repression. By defining the boundaries of church and state relations. Therefore, James Madison, the author of the U.S. Constitution, saw a special importance in religious freedom. The U.S. Constitution guaranteed this principle in the First Amendment, which protects freedom of religion for American citizens and provides the right to practice their own religion according to their beliefs, or to not adhere to any religion at all.

The First Amendment, adopted in 1791, states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...;" this provision contains two parts, and each one creates a separate religious liberty or freedom. The first part, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" is the establishment clause. The second part: "...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof", is referred to the free exercise clause (Yüksel and Büyükbaş 68).

The establishment clause prohibits the U.S. government from establishing or creating an official church or religion and forcing Americans to follow it. It restricts government from interfering in the internal management or church-related choices of a religious group. This clause not only forbids the government from establishing an official religion, but also prohibits government actions that excessively favor one religion over another and prefer religion over non-religion, or non-religion over religion (Hemeyer 21).

The free exercise clause, on the other hand, prohibits the government, in most instances, from interfering with an individual's religious practices. It is often identified as the freedom of religion, granting American citizens the right to worship God, or not, as they choose, based on their own beliefs. This implies that the government cannot punish citizens because of their religious beliefs. Furthermore, the clause protects not just religious beliefs but also some actions made on behalf of those beliefs, as long as the practice does not violate 'public morals' or a 'compelling' governmental interest.

Therefore, the First Amendment serves as a foundation for ensuring religious liberty by separating church and state principle, which restricts government interference in religious matters and allows all Americans to uphold their sincerely held beliefs both privately and publicly. This principle is implied in both clauses, as each ensures that the government neither interferes with religious practices nor supports any religion (Yüksel and Büyükbaş 68).

Although the U.S. Constitution sets the foundational principles of religious freedom, the federal government has expanded and clarified these protections to address legal and societal issues. Via federal legislation and executive actions, Congress has sought to protect religious rights across multiple areas.

In the United States, federal protections uphold religious convictions, which encompass beliefs, practices, and ways of worship related to one's faith. These religious convictions are protected by statute at the federal level. Any discrimination based on religion is prohibited in workplaces, public institutions, and other organizations under federal law. Thus, several key

pieces of federal legislation have been passed to ensure the protection of the free exercise of religion.

One of the most significant legislation is the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), enacted in 1993. The act states that “Government shall not substantially burden a person’s exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability.” According to RFRA, for a burden to be placed on an individual's free exercise of religion, the government must demonstrate that the law concerns an interest of utmost importance (a “compelling government interest”). In simpler terms, RFRA protects individuals’ religious practices and guarantees that the government may restrict them only if there is a compelling justification (“United Nations Human Rights Council”).

The next legislation is the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was enacted to end discrimination based on religion, race, gender, color, and national origin. The CRA guarantees equal voting rights by removing registration requirements and procedures that are biased against these minorities. Additionally, it forbids segregation and religious persecution in educational institutions and other public areas (Woods 183).

Another instance of a legislated provision for religious freedom is the No Child Left Behind Act, which was established as a law in 2001. The NCLB requires that for school districts to obtain federal funding, they must demonstrate that they do not restrict students' religious expression. To provide clarification, the federal Department of Education released its Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools. This decision permits students to pray at school on their own.

In the United States, these laws guarantee that all individuals are part of civil society and have equal access to social services like education and healthcare. Individuals are not obligated to abandon their faith to obtain employment, since the law firmly bans such discrimination by reinforcing the principle that all individuals, regardless of their faith, are treated fairly.

Moreover, U.S. policies and laws are rooted in the First Amendment, an official government document that protects essential rights, such as freedom of speech, the press, and assembly which also contributes to religious liberty. These freedoms ensure that people can openly share their opinions on religious issues, express and publish their beliefs without restriction, and gather peacefully to engage in discussions or worship in any way they prefer (Hemeyer 21-23).

However, maintaining social harmony and mutual respect in a religiously diverse society like America requires active engagement beyond constitutional protections. There are national and local issues that can only be addressed by developing cooperative relationships among people of various religious traditions. Many initiatives and efforts have been undertaken to promote understanding and collaboration among different faith communities, and inter-faith dialogue has emerged as a key initiative.

1.3.2. Interfaith Dialogue

America is a country marked by religious diversity and pluralism, in which different religious communities coexist, interact, and engage with one another. Although these

interactions have traditionally led to inter-religious conflicts and tensions, but currently, these groups predominantly live in tolerant environment of peace and harmony.

This peaceful coexistence stems from interfaith dialogues, which brings individuals from various religious and spiritual backgrounds together for open and respectful conversations. These conversations made by individuals and groups from different religious traditions to exchange wisdom, foster understanding, and reduce tensions among each other (“American Society Review”).

The main objective of interfaith dialogue is to address common human challenges and to take a stand against harmful factors. Since individuals of various beliefs coexist in the same shared society, their issues are often intertwined. However, while adhering to different theologies and expressing their viewpoints through various scriptures and teachings, they recognize the importance of collaborating to tackle these issues. Interfaith dialogue serves as an effective mechanism for creating multi-faith collaborations, establishing trust, and encouraging inclusion to achieve shared objectives (Vohra 2).

Indeed, when Christians and Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus unit in solidarity, they bring attention and gather larger support for issues like growing inequality, rising violence in American cities, etc, by working collectively, deep goodwill can be produced between civil servants, religious leaders, and community activists. This collaboration helps bridge gaps, refute misconceptions, and promote harmonious and inclusive society (“Interfaith Dialogue”).

In the United States, the advancement of inter-faith dialogue has been influenced by instances of persecution. Various religious groups have experienced discrimination in the country at different periods in history. However, in recent years, the Muslim community has been the most affected, due to the September 11, 2001 attack. This incident led to the rise of Islamophobia and misconceptions about Islam, which have often depicted it as a faith that advocates violence. Muslims in America have often been perceived as inherently militant and irrational, with many associating them with extremist groups.

After 9/11, interfaith dialogue entered the spotlight as a potentially viable solution to religious violence and extremism, also discussions regarding interfaith dialogue and the importance of comprehending others' beliefs gained momentum with increased urgency. Multiple interfaith groups began to activate their initiatives in response; religious leaders and interfaith organizations expanded their efforts to counter hostility and misunderstanding through dialogue and debate. Such dialogue serves as a mechanism for promoting unity and reducing tensions in the society, by tackling issues like breaking stereotypes, managing theological distinctions, and fostering social cohesion (Banchoff).

Interfaith dialogue in America reflects the nation's commitment to religious freedom and pluralism. It is considered as a sacred spiritual practice and has become increasingly prevalent in interventions to address conflict arising from exposure to religious diversity. Thus the practice of interfaith dialogue as a sacred religious imperative and opportunity has gained prominence among a variety of religious traditions. Numerous religious organizations advocate for dialogue among faiths that differ from their own as a sacred religious duty to

promote both personal development and peace building which are fundamental aspects of religious teachings (Swanson 1).

Overall, religious diversity is a defining feature of the American landscape. From the colonial period to the present day, successive waves of immigration from all corners of the globe have made the U.S. one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. This diversity is managed through a commitment to religious pluralism, an approach that welcomes all beliefs and promotes peaceful coexistence. Legal frameworks, such as constitutional protections, and initiatives like interfaith dialogue are vital in supporting this pluralistic vision. The United States seeks to build an inclusive and harmonious society where individuals of all faiths can live together in harmony.

However, this religious freedom, characterized by the absence of an official religion and the liberty for all to worship freely, has posed a major challenge in defining a shared and unified religious identity within American society.

Chapter Two

Religion in the Quest for a Common American Identity

The question of American identity is significantly influenced by the nation's extensive religious diversity. The difficulty in defining American identity arises not only from religious diversity but also from other elements, such as racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences. However, among these, religion is the most sensitive element, often causing conflicts, divisions, and even wars more than other factors.

The interactions and encounters among different religious sensitivities can cause conflicts and may affect social harmony and peace. So, what are the implications of religious diversity on constructing a unified American identity? And how does this diversity extend its influence on social peace, harmony, and patriotism?

This chapter explores how the question of American identity has been addressed in light of the wild religious diversity. It begins by examining the historical dominance of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) identity, which for a long time defined the cultural and religious norms of the nation, then it tracks down how the Judeo-Christian tradition emerged as an attempt to expand this self-identification, while still maintaining implicit boundaries. The chapter concludes by examining the exclusion of Islam from this paradigm shedding light on how Muslims have been positioned as outsiders.

2.1. The WASP Identity

The United States is a pluralistic society composed of various religious, ethnic, and racial groups from all over the world. The foundations of American society as an independent

nation were established with the British settlement and colonization in the early 17th century. Throughout the next two centuries, the number of settlers from the British Isles grew consistently, and the 13 colonies along the eastern coast of North America became vital parts of the British Empire.

Even though there was a presence of other European nationalities, African slaves, and numerous indigenous cultural groups whose ancestors had inhabited the American continent for thousands of years, the earlier British settlers established economic, cultural, and political dominance over the lands that would eventually become the United States (Cortés).

Most early immigrants to the American colonies came from northern England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Scotch-Irish), though the majority were from England. Fleeing religious persecution and seeking new opportunities in the U.S, these settlers, who were mostly of English descent, had a strong Protestant spirit that greatly influenced the moral and social structure of the U.S. Thus, the concept of WASP identity an acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants emerged from this foundation, consisting of distinctive racial (white), ethnic (Anglo-Saxon), and religious (Protestant) features (German).

Sociologists and historians use the term WASP to refer to a British-derived ethnic heritage in American society, often tracing its origins and family history in North America to the era of British settlement. Sociologists Adalberto Aguirre and Jonathan Turner have defined WASP as “an ethnic complex consisting of northern European ethnic stock with light, ‘white’ skin; Protestant religious beliefs; Protestant-inspired values based on individualism,

hard work, savings, and secular material success; and English cultural traditions (language, laws, and beliefs) and institutional structures (politics, economics, and education)” (Cortés).

Scholars use the terms Anglo-Protestant and White Anglo Saxon Protestant interchangeably, but the term Anglo-Protestant has gained popularity as the most accurate descriptor for this specific population (Cortés). Though people usually believe that the identity of WASP emerged as a result of Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it is, in fact a historical construct that is much older and closely linked to the spread of Protestantism during the 16th century (German).

Samuel Huntington identified the centrality of Anglo-Protestant culture to American identity and highlighted that any discussion about American identity should acknowledge its Anglo-Protestant origins. In his article entitled “The Hispanic Challenge,” he defines the components of the Anglo-Protestant culture as:

English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, including the responsibility of rulers and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a “city on a hill” (Huntington 1-2).

Accordingly, it can be asserted that what Huntington considers to be the fundamental culture of America is the culture of the first settlers, who were predominantly Protestant, and who arrived on the new continent to create a community where religious liberty existed, along

with a community where individualism was commended. Furthermore, it can be said that a form of Protestant work ethic arises from this individualism (“Anglo-Protestantism..”).

America was founded as a Protestant society, and for two hundred years almost all Americans were Protestant. Protestant immigration came in waves as immigrants sought a place where they could practice their religion freely. The earliest Christians who arrived in North America from Europe were members of several groups: the Puritans, the Anglicans, the Reformists, and the Pilgrims. Each of these groups was fundamental in defining American Protestantism. However, the Puritans were specifically the most significant and impact group because they were the ones who established American ethics for the next two centuries.

The Puritans were a group of Christians who fled England due to religious persecution by the Church of England. Their first arrival was in New England, and then they spread throughout the rest of the northern colonies during the early 17th century. The Puritans adhered to strict practices and rules, which often made them appear as religious fanatics. However, they maintained the belief that hard work made men and women morally good, which was the foundation of the Protestant work ethic.

The Puritans played a significant role in colonizing much of the United States, especially in the New England colonies of Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Among these, Massachusetts Bay stood out the most. This colony was founded in 1630 under the leadership of Governor John Winthrop, who envisioned it as a "city upon a hill" (a passage from the Bible) that would serve as an example to Europe of how a Protestant society could flourish (“The Puritans”).

In his 2004 book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Samuel Huntington argued that religious intensity was undoubtedly greatest among the Puritans, especially in Massachusetts. They led the way in defining their settlement based on "a Covenant with God," to create "a city on a hill" as a model for the entire world. They viewed their presence in the New World as a divine mission, regarding themselves as a chosen people establishing "the new Israel" or "the new Jerusalem" in what they believed to be the promised land. Over time, people of other Protestant denominations adopted this perspective; they began to see themselves and America through a similar lens of divine purpose and exceptionalism (64).

American views on morality, economic activity, government, and public policy were deeply influenced by Anglo-Protestant traditions. These traditions emphasized personal responsibility, hard work, and self-discipline, which became core principles of American culture. Additionally, the Protestant work ethic fostered a strong belief in capitalism and individual success.

In politics, ideals such as limited government, individual rights, and moral governance were rooted in Protestant beliefs. These values also influenced public policies related to education and civic duty. However, most importantly, all of these traditions formed the foundation of the American Creed, which is a set of secular political principles such as liberty and democracy that continue to define American identity (Huntington 62).

In the latter years, however, the WASPs had broadened to include Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians. These groups, especially the Irish and certain Germans, were mainly Catholic; their increasing populations challenged the Protestant dominance on American identity, and

the United States' religious identity was being redefined more broadly from Protestant to Christian. Additionally, with World War II and the assimilation of many Southern and Eastern European immigrants and their descendants into U.S. society, religion in America became even more diverse, and the religious identity expanded to Judeo-Christian.

After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, many immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Middle Eastern countries arrived in America. This caused a further weakening of the Protestant base on which American identity had been built. Subsequently, following the passage of this law, successes in civil rights movements removed racial legal barriers and reinforced the transition from a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society toward a more pluralistic and inclusive one.

Moreover, the ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity eroded the legitimacy of the remaining central elements of American identity; the cultural core of Anglo-Protestantism declined as the United States became a multi-religious reality and embraced a broader, more pluralistic society that celebrated diverse cultural and religious traditions (Huntington 1).

2.2. The Judeo-Christian Tradition

The expression Judeo-Christian is employed to assert a connection or common ground between Judaism and Christianity. The term seeks to reflect some form of unity between the two religions, despite their many differences and a complex history. This term was used to suggest that both religions share very similar values and beliefs, and that both faiths can work together toward commonly shared goals (Rife).

Descriptions of the United States being a Judeo-Christian country have been widely used in political discourse, especially during times of crisis such as World War II and the Cold War. The phrase has often functioned as a rhetorical tool to promote national unity and define America's moral identity. However, its origins and development reveal that it was never a neutral or universally inclusive term, but rather a political construct influenced by specific historical contexts and strategic purposes (Barnett 1).

In a book entitled *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*, K. Healan Gaston, a lecturer on American Religious History and Ethics at Harvard Divinity School, argues that before the 20th century, there was no conception of Judeo-Christianity. The United States was seen as a Christian nation that was implicitly centered on Protestantism. Although Catholic and Jewish communities were growing rapidly, they were still regarded as outsiders by the Protestant majority. It was only in the 1930s, and especially during World War II, that the concept of Judeo-Christianity began to evolve (21).

In fact, the term Judeo-Christian initially referred to Jewish converts to Christianity rather than to any notion of shared religious values between the two faiths. It was first used in a letter from Reverend Alexander McCaul, a man known for being a missionary to the Jews, specifically aiming to convert them. In his letter, McCaul wrote: "From all I can see there is but one way to bring about the object of the Society, that is by erecting a Judæo Christian community, a city of refuge, where all who wish to be baptized could be supplied with the means of earning their bread " (Burack).

However, it all began in the 1930s with the rise of Nazi anti-Semitism, which prompted concerned Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to take steps to promote understanding and tolerance (Bruch 21). During that time, interfaith groups popularized the term to describe America in more inclusive religious terms in order to combat anti-semitism and anti-Catholicism. The term was intended to encompass America's three faiths: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, and became a means to indicate a struggle against fascism (Burack).

The historian Mark Silk noted that America's Judeo-Christian tradition emerged as "a common faith for a united democratic front" against fascism (Smith 74). During this period, the word Christian had become a political code, often associated with fascism and anti-Semitism. For instance, Father Charles Coughlin's Christian Front was a pro-Nazi movement in the U.S. that supported Nazi ideology and spread anti-Jewish rhetoric. In response, liberal Christian leaders emphasized the existence of the Judeo-Christian tradition to demonstrate their spiritual solidarity with endangered European Jews (Bruch 21).

Nonetheless, the term truly gained prominence in the early Cold War years, when pastors, politicians, and pundits used it to mobilize America's spiritual forces against the "godless Communist" enemy. The Cold War was a period of tension, clash, and sometimes actual war between the U.S. and its allies and the Soviet Union from around 1947 to 1991. The U.S. viewed it as a fight between democracy and communism. American leaders began using the concept of a shared religious heritage to define America's moral identity and role in the world (Bruch 22).

For President Harry Truman and other American leaders, the Cold War transformed into a fight between religious freedom and democracy versus "Godless" Communism. Truman, therefore, recognized that appealing to vague religious values could unite Americans to oppose their enemies. As he stated in his 1948 State of the Union Address, "We are a people of faith." However, when he mentioned "faith," he notably referred to Christian and Jewish beliefs, not the many other religions in America, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or Native traditions.

Under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the concept of "Judeo-Christianity" became deeply embedded in American political discourse. Eisenhower asserted that Judeo-Christian values were fundamental in guiding the United States in its mission to promote liberty, democracy, and peace. In a 1952 statement, he declared: "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith...With us, of course, it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion [that holds] that all men are created equal" (Burack).

Accordingly, the idea of Judeo-Christian gained wide acceptance when President Dwight Eisenhower referred to the Judeo-Christian roots of "our form of government." He chose words that embraced different Christian denominations and Jews under a common civic identity (Greene). Indeed, when American leaders Truman, Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy used the idea of Judeo-Christianity during the early Cold War to unify Americans, it quickly began to be used by all sides of the political spectrum. In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1963:

“One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence ” (Burack).

American leaders and religious organizations started to use the concept as an indicator of shared core moral values among Jews and Christians. It also became a shorthand to represent morality, godliness, democracy, anti-communism, patriotism, and more. On the other hand, it was also seen that Christianity used this as an approach to assimilate Judaism, in a way erasing the very real differences that keep the two religions separate (Harvey 214).

As pointed out by Warren Zev Harvey in "The Judeo-Christian Tradition's Five Others", the phrase Judeo-Christian tradition achieved more success than anticipated in the United States. However, this victory had a downside for numerous Jews: The distinctions between Judaism and Christianity were getting overlooked. Judaism started being perceived as a Christian sect with just one or two differences (214).

Theologian of the Jewish faith, Arthur Cohen, was highly critical of the idea described as the Judeo-Christian tradition. He authored an essay in 1969 entitled "The Myth of Judeo-Christian Tradition," where he argued that it is not a genuine historical tradition. Rather, he presents this view as fictional, mythical, and politically constructed. His key argument questions how Judaism and Christianity can be classified under a single tradition when they

differ fundamentally about something so crucial: the Messiah. In one religion, the Messiah hasn't arrived yet, while according to the other, he has already come (Harvey 215).

The phrase of Judeo-Christian values is a modern invention. It emerged during the World War II and Cold War era. Many Christians and political leaders in America have adopted this term to discuss the so-called common principles between Jewish and Christian religions; however, honestly speaking, it tends to erase Jewish identity and excludes individuals of other faith backgrounds, notably Muslims (Burack).

2.3. The Place of Islam

The term Judeo-Christian has become increasingly politicized, and there appears to be a hidden racist or exclusionary motive behind the omission of Islam. Some might argue that Islam is not included in this concept because it arrived in America later than Judaism (Freedman). However, Islam has been part of the American fabric since the earliest periods of settlement. The historical roots of Islam in America are complex and contested. Some historians argue that Muslims explorers may have arrived on this continent far earlier than Christopher Columbus, with the earliest estimates dating back to the 12th century (“Islam the First American Muslims”).

In addition, many scholars argue that Muslims crucially contributed to several European expeditions to the Americas, serving as both mapmakers and guides. Estevanico of Azamor, a Moroccan guide who landed in Florida in 1527, is often mentioned as one of the earliest documented Muslims in America. By the 1700s, historical records indicate the

existence of Moors (a term used for North African Muslims) living in South Carolina; many were expelled from their homeland by order of the Spanish Crown (Harvey and Blum 366).

The first significant migration of Muslims to America, however, occurred during transatlantic slave trade. It is estimated that 10% to 50% of the ten million Africans brought to the Americas were Muslims. Today, Islam is an important part of the nation's cultural fabric, with estimates of 4.5 million Muslims in the United States. However, surveys funded by the American Jewish Committee claim that Muslims number less than three million in America. Despite such differences, Islam is expected to become the second largest religion in the country ("American Muslims 2025: A Brief Profile").

Nevertheless, Islam continues to be excluded from the Judeo-Christian paradigm that has defined American religious and national identity. This phrase is often used to show that Judaism and Christianity share much in common and that this commonality has influence on the progress, morality, and values of Western civilization. However, when examined closely, Islam has more in common with both Judaism and Christianity than those two religions have in common with each other. So, it becomes clear that the religion of Islam is purposefully left out of this phrase (Lipham).

After all, Christianity and Judaism are just two of a trinity of monotheistic faiths, often called the Abrahamic religions, of which the third is Islam. In fact, Judaism is far closer to Islam in terms of theology and practice than it is to Christianity. Therefore, the term Judeo-Christian fails to capture this broader shared heritage. For things that fit the definition of

being linked to all three groups, “Abrahamic” might be more accurate and inclusive, since all these three faiths trace their origins back to the prophet Abraham (Rife).

This exclusion highlights that the paradigm is more of a political construct than a historical or religious reality (Rife). The irrational fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims, known as Islamophobia, has deep historical roots. One significant factor is Orientalism, a collection of Western thought that has long portrayed the Islamic world as fundamentally different, inferior, and even threatening (Ashrof).

According to the scholar Agnes Heller, the term Judeo-Christian represents a form of political Orientalism. In an article she wrote in 1951, she argued that these traditions have become political instruments used to determine who is accepted and who is not. She further explained that the notion of Judeo-Christianity has been employed to create a strong division between the West and East, or more precisely, Christianity/Judaism vs. Islam. This political interpretation of Orientalism depicts Islam as alien, dangerous, and mismatched with Western values (Nathan and Topolski 3).

This demonization and dehumanization of the "other" is what Edward Said's theory of Orientalism clarifies; the "other" becomes Orientalized by the West as a savage, uncivilized, and barbaric group of people who need Western intervention to be educated, civilized, and saved. This Orientalism is the cause of the growth of Islamophobia and the disconnection of Muslims from American religious and cultural identity.

Said examined Western scholarship of what he referred to as the Orient, specifically of the Arab Islamic world, though he was an Arab Christian, he argued that early scholarship and historical documentation of the Muslims by Westerners was prejudiced and biased and had always projected a false and stereotyped vision of otherness of the Islamic world. Such Orientalism, seen as a Western fantasy only facilitated and justified the Western colonial policy (Isa et al. 622-663).

The term Judeo-Christian has been utilized by the radical right to promote a different political agenda. Their intent is to frame Western values in a way that excludes Muslims, while simultaneously distancing themselves from politically toxic associations with antisemitism. What they truly suggest is creating a divide of "us versus them" between the West and Islam. This is not about the inclusion of Jews in these values, but rather about the xenophobic exclusion of an "other."

In 1993, the political scientist Samuel Huntington claimed that a clash of civilizations was certain to happen between Islam and the West. However, many who criticize him argue persuasively that civilizations evolve, and civilizational identities serve political agendas. Defining the west as Judeo-Christian, and in inevitable tension with Islam, is a clear political choice (Greene).

After al-Qaeda terrorist assault on September 11, 2001, Judeo-Christian tradition became an Islamophobic codeword (Burack). The attacks were the crashing of two passenger planes into the World Trade Centers and one passenger plane into the Pentagon by al-Qaeda, an Islamist extremist group based outside the US. These attacks took the lives of nearly 3,000

Americans and were the result of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden's official declaration of war on the US in 1996 (Neptune 7).

In 2002, the prominent evangelist Franklin Graham said, "The god of Islam is not the same god of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different god, and I believe a very evil and a very wicked religion." This is not true as one of the Abrahamic religions, the God of Islam, Allah, is indeed the same God that revealed himself to Abraham in the Hebrew Bible (Burack).

In conclusion, the problem of American identity emerges from the rich tapestry of religious beliefs and practices present in the country. When different faith communities meet or interact, they affect social harmony and challenge the maintenance of national unity. Earlier, American identity was defined by the concept of WASP, which positioned Protestantism as the dominant cultural and religious force. This definition, however, is no longer adequate to represent the pluralistic and multicultural reality of contemporary America.

The term Judeo-Christian tradition has come to be used fairly frequently by those on the political right, particularly Republicans. On the surface, it might appear to be an act of good faith inclusion to incorporate Judaism into an imagined set of "Western" values. However, this is not how the term has functioned. It has served to exclude rather than to include. It has excluded other religious groups, including Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists, secularists, and most notably, Muslims.

In this way, both the WASP identity and the Judeo-Christian paradigm have served to define American identity in exclusive religious terms, prompting ongoing debates about the religious identity of America and Americans. While it is clear that both paradigms fail to depict the religious-makeup of contemporary America, there are continuous debates about the most accurate description of the wildly diverse religious landscape in the country.

Chapter Three

American Civil Religion

Throughout American history, various paradigms have emerged in an attempt to define and manage the question of American identity. From the Protestant rooted WASP identity to the broader notion of the Judeo-Christian tradition, each framework has sought to unify the nation under a shared cultural or religious banner. However, these models have often been marked by exclusion, privileging certain faiths while marginalizing others. In response to this persistent tension between unity and diversity, the concept of American civil religion gained prominence as an inclusive alternative.

Civil religion is a concept promoted by the sociologist Robert Bellah, by which he attempts to depict the connection between religion and national identity in the United States. He argued that the U.S. has developed a kind of shared moral and symbolic framework that is not tied to any one religious denomination but draws heavily from Anglo-Protestant traditions and broader Judeo-Christian values.

Robert Bellah formulated the concept of American civil religion (ACR) to help explicate what it means to be an American. He explains it as a set of analogies, rituals, and ideas influenced by religion that promote cohesive order and foster social and cultural integration. The concept American civil religion describes the significant emphasis on non-denominational religious themes in America.

This chapter explores the concept of civil religion in America as a unifying framework to promote sense of identity. It begins by defining the general idea of civil religion and then

traces its evolution in the American context, highlighting key historical moments that shaped its development. The chapter then examines the core elements that characterize American civil religion such as sacred texts, symbols, rituals, and national myths.

Following this, the chapter discusses the unifying role civil religion plays in fostering a shared sense of belonging and identity among all American citizens. Finally, the chapter addresses the critical perspective that questions the integrative power of civil religion, arguing that it often excludes minority groups, reinforces white Christian dominance, and serves more as a project of nationalism than a genuine historical tradition.

3.1. The Concept of Civil Religion

The state has acknowledged the importance and value of religious diversity in the United States since its inception. Historically, the management of religious diversity has involved the government's recognition and use of religious sentiment to unite individuals of different faiths around a shared national purpose. This approach took shape in the construction of a meta-narrative using widely recognized religious imagery to promote political unity and consequently frame American goals (Barke and Goudiss 4-5).

The idea of civil religion in America has emerged as a response to the challenges posed by the wild religious diversity to the objective of establishing a coherent society and a unified nation. Some have suggested that the only real religion in America which provides guidelines for all to follow is civil religion. They argue that this ideological framework referred to as C.R., has fostered unity among Americans of diverse backgrounds (Gwydir 2).

Robert N. Bellah's 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America," is considered the first work to introduce and define civil religion in America. Bellah was an American sociologist of religion, and he proposed that civil religion represented a distinctive form of religion, one that transcended people's classical understandings of what religion could be. In reality, religion now served as a means to reunite the country through mutual social understandings (Huntington 103).

Civil Religion refers to a shared set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that unite people under the same laws and rules. It also provides a sense of inclusion, belonging, and a religious dimension to national identity and unity. Civil religion exists outside of any specific religious institution or specifically associated with any one God. It does not compete with established religions but rather coexists alongside with them and is influenced by them. These elements have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and continue to provide a religious dimension to American life (Djupe and Olson 105).

Civil religion is intended to appeal to a symbol that most Americans can understand, recognize, and relate to, regardless of their religious beliefs. This type of symbolism is an example of an expression of civil religion. It serves to unite the American people together by providing a common set of values that enables citizens of different backgrounds to connect with each other and form a cohesive American identity (Gwydir 4).

Bellah was inspired by the writings of French philosopher and political scientist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who first used the term civil religion in his 1762 book, "*The Social Contract*." Rousseau believed that a civil religion, based on shared moral values, was

necessary to create a strong society. Although Rousseau's concept focused on Europe, Bellah expanded on his ideas and applied them to the American context (Barke and Goudiss 5).

In his article, Bellah argued that the United States had developed its own version of civil religion. He explained that it was made up of shared beliefs, symbols, and rituals rooted in the very foundations of American culture. Moreover, Bellah highlighted the strongest elements of American civil religion, such as the belief in a higher power or divine intervention figure who guides the nation, the admiration of national heroes (such as presidents, movement leaders, soldiers, etc.), and the declaration of national holidays and ceremonies (Huntington 104).

Many scholars perceive civil religion as the glue that holds society together, serving as a means that fosters unity in the nation. It is a deeply felt and strongly patriotic universal religion of the nation which does not compete with established religions but exists alongside them and is supported by them. It is all part of the American way of religion. Rousseau argued that this idea of Civil Religion is essential to the growth of societies, and religion should be viewed through its impact on society (Horton).

Civil religion can be described as an aspect of American society and governance that draws from the Judeo-Christian tradition to develop values and belief systems that many Americans can recognize and relate to. It serves to connect the American people with each other and with their governance without fostering religious intolerance.

The United States and most of its leadership have traditionally maintained a civil religion that can be traced through the beliefs and speeches of the Founding Fathers and past Presidents of the U.S. This belief system and its rituals have been vital in the development and legitimation of American institutions (Gwydir 2).

3.2. The Evolution of Civil Religion in America

Some of the components of American civil religion have very old origins. The concept has evolved over time and new elements have become part of the collective memory and pride of the American people and therefore part of American civil religion. Events, virtues, documents, figures, and days, which hold special significance in American collective memory and conscience have been ritualized or sanctified .

The oldest elements of American civil religion can be traced back to the period of early settlements and the founding of the American republic. The Founding Fathers and the founding documents of the republic are amongst the earliest components of civil religion in America (Gwydir 8).

The works and speeches of the early U.S. presidents illustrate how religion, and more specifically the concept of God, plays a constitutive role in American life, as they often employ specific religious terms and symbolism. Religion would continue to be important in American society and policy. President Johnson correctly pointed out that the United States wasn't a country without religion. Instead, it was a society based on morals and values but did not have an official, government-supported religion.

Several leaders were regarded as priests of the civil faith and even prophets who "led the people in affirming and celebrating the nation" (Baghli442). Their speeches are still quoted; for example, Washington, in his inaugural address, speaks of the "Almighty Being who rules over the universe" and the "Great Author of every public and private good."

Jefferson refers to the "Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe." James Monroe cut to the chase with "Almighty God" in his Second Inaugural Address in 1821. John F. Kennedy, in his 1961 Inaugural Address, carried the theme through more than a century later. "I have sworn before you and the Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago," Kennedy said. "Let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." ("The Origins of Civil Religion").

The founding fathers played a crucial role in setting the foundation for civil religion in the United States. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin contributed to both the development and success of the American Revolution. They transferred their principles into founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which were sanctified with time, paving the way for American institutions that extended far into the future (Gwydir 10).

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were considered new sacred scriptures, and Washington was viewed as a leader chosen by God, like Moses, who led Americans out of the oppression of the old world (Richey and Jones 30).

Moreover, the manner in which these leaders interpreted religion is essential. The majority of the Founding Fathers did not follow established Christian denominations. Rather, they highlighted universal morals or values taught by religion instead of the specific teachings of any one sect. Scholar David Holmes characterizes many of them as Deists, who accepted the existence of a single God yet rejected certain religious doctrines. Holmes identifies five fundamental Deist beliefs: the existence of God, worship of God, virtue as the core of faith, repentance for sins, and existence after death. Hence, these principles resemble certain elements of civil religion (Gwydir 11).

In his influential article "Civil Religion in America," Robert Bellah explores the concept of civil religion and its relationship with the founding fathers of the United States. He stated that the statements and actions of the founding fathers, especially the first few presidents, shaped the nature and character of civil religion as it has been maintained ever since. Bellah noted that Washington, Adams, and Jefferson all referenced God in their inaugural addresses, but in a way that seems more Unitarian than directly Christian. They never mention Christ, but do call upon a God who has a special interest in America (7).

Thomas Jefferson, deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals and his deist beliefs, crafted his own bible in the early 1800s. Titled "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth", this version excluded anything he deemed irrational or supernatural, such as miracles and claims of Jesus's divine nature. Instead, Jefferson concentrated on Jesus's ethical lessons, compiling a new narrative solely from Gospel passages emphasizing morality over religious doctrine ("The Jefferson Bible").

Continuing this sacralization of national figures and ideals, the U.S. government later formalized celebrations of presidential leadership. Washington's Birthday became a federal holiday in 1885 and was eventually broadened into what is now popularly known as Presidents' Day. This shift from commemorating a single founding figure to including others most notably Abraham Lincoln signaled an effort to unify Americans around shared democratic values. Such holidays do more than remember great leaders; they ritualize civic virtues, sanctify political history, and reinforce the collective memory that sustains civil religion.

The Founding Fathers played a crucial role in setting the foundations for civil religion in the United States. They developed a set of principles that characterized this sphere of American society and established which values would most influence the lives of the American population. Furthermore, they established the standards for what American leadership would prioritize and what their rhetoric would consist of (Gwydir 14).

The Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, represented an essential period of trial for the United States and its Constitution. Bellah states that "the Civil War raised the deepest questions of national meaning" (Bellah 9), and the principles and discourse that emerged during this period reflected the beliefs required to maintain a unified nation throughout the rest of American history (Gwydir 14).

The civil war changed how people viewed the nation's purpose. They were led to embrace the "civil religion" that would guide American identity and help maintain national unity. In this era, religion and religious language became more common in public life and

discourse. Bellah argues that the country's self-perception, which developed during this period, expressed itself as civil religion. Consequently, the Civil War represented a phase in American history during which the American public and its leaders were influenced to articulate themselves in a more religious manner (Bellah 9).

The most prominent figure of this era of civil religion was President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln both formulated and personally represented the ideology of civil religion that was evident during this time of conflict. He was a deeply religious person who brought the Puritan beliefs of his parents and the Christian principles he embraced into the presidency during the nation's deepest crisis. Lincoln believed that his position as president was to interpret the will of God and take action accordingly. This was especially relevant in his viewpoints on the conduct of the Civil War and its outcome (Gwydir 15).

In this view of the Civil War, civil religion kept the idea of a God who judges the nation by higher moral standards. After Lincoln's assassination, he became a symbol of Christian sacrifice for the sake of the Union. He was seen as a kind of secular Christ, whose death helped bring about the nation's rebirth. Since then, he has remained a central figure in American civil religion (Lidz 6).

Abraham Lincoln, regarded by many as the greatest American civil theologian, cast the Civil War as a trial of the nation's soul, and the preservation of the Union became an article of faith. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln used the language of civil religion to call the nation to account for the offense of slavery—an offense against humanity and an offense against God, who had wrought the retribution that the earlier Americans had feared. In the

Gettysburg Address, Lincoln called for the rebirth of the nation under a new covenant, purified in the blood of the fallen soldiers (“The Origins of Civil Religion”).

The aftermath of the Civil War left a large number of soldiers who needed to be memorialized. As a result, national cemeteries were established to honor these fallen soldiers. Of these, Gettysburg National Cemetery became one of the most significant cemeteries which President Lincoln’s famous address served to dedicate. This new symbolism served as both physical and ritualistic expression of American civil religion (Bellah 11).

While the Civil War tested the nation's unity and defined its moral direction, later periods of national crisis challenged America in different ways. Following the end of the Second World War, the United States entered another struggle known as the Cold War . This ideological conflict with the Soviet Union was often discussed by American politicians as a religiously based conflict. During this time, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served as president from 1953 to 1961, was often considered one of the most religious presidents in American history. He played a major role in making religion more important in America (Gwydir 20).

President Dwight David Eisenhower led a strong push to make religion more visible in public life. He established the annual "presidential" prayer breakfast, and the presidential practice of ending speeches with "may God bless America." With Eisenhower's support, Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance and put "In God We Trust" on all U.S. currency (“An Historical Reflection about U.S. Civil Religion”).

These policies and actions were direct reflections of the strength of civil religion after World War II, persisting throughout the Cold War period. This has led to a greater expansion and growth of civil religion in the United States and demonstrated to the world that the nation upholds a distinctly religious ideology (Gwydir 23).

3.3. The Components of American Civil Religion

All religions comprise systems of beliefs and practices that assist individuals in answering their deeper inquiries about identity, existence, and meaning. U.S. civil religion has all the characteristics of a religion. It is a sociological concept that suggests a quasi-religious faith exists within the U.S. (“An Historical Reflection about U.S. Civil Religion”). According to sociologist Robert Bellah, ACR is “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share...(values) expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (Bellah 3).

Among the most important expressions of this shared faith are the founding documents of the American republic, which have become essential elements of the American civil religion, as they form a part of the collective national pride. These include the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. These documents are regarded with a reverence similar to sacred texts, representing the core beliefs and laws of the nation. The principles of liberty, equality, and democracy that they embody are central to the American civil faith (Jacobs).

U.S. civil religion also includes national holidays such as Independence Day (the Fourth of July), Memorial Day, Washington’s Birthday, Martin Luther King Day, and

Thanksgiving. These days hold patriotic significance and involve ritualistic practices that bring Americans together in a collective act of remembrance, gratitude, and national identity.

Memorial Day and Veterans Day are national days dedicated to honoring the sacrifices of soldiers and reinforcing the values of service, sacrifice, and national unity. Likewise, Christianity also has special days of remembrance for saints, such as Saint Patrick's Day, Saint George's Day, Saint Mary's Day, etc (“An Historical Reflection about U.S. Civil Religion”).

The flag of the United States serves as a symbol of American civil religion. The flag holds deep emotional and spiritual importance, symbolizing the ideals, sacrifices, and identity of the nation. The rituals linked to the flag, including the Pledge of Allegiance and the playing of the National Anthem, resemble those performed in churches and mosques (Jacobs).

U.S. civil religion has served as a deeply felt and patriotic universal faith of the country. It does not compete with established religions but coexists with them and is supported by them. In many U.S. church sanctuaries, for instance, the American flag is displayed as a traditional decoration. Many outsiders, however, cannot understand the U.S. reverence for the flag and that American citizens are expected to hold their hands over their hearts during a performance of the national anthem or when reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (“An Historical Reflection about U.S. Civil Religion”).

Presidential speeches and national rhetoric also play a central role in shaping American civil religion. During times of crisis or significance, speeches by leaders such as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address often carry a moral and quasi-religious tone that appeals to the ideals and

unity of the American people (Jacobs). As a religious historian and theologian, Martin Marty explains that this version of CR represents a blend of historic faith with deep national feelings.

The typical function of CR often operates in the priestly mode, with the nation's president, particularly the early founding fathers serving as the high priest of the American civil religion. Since Abraham Lincoln's memorable phrase entered the Pledge of Allegiance, this expression has gained a semi-official position, though its interpretation varies among people of different religious backgrounds .

Abraham Lincoln is considered the most famous representative of the prophetic mode of civil religion. Bellah stated that Lincoln is a symbolic martyr who helped reunite a divided nation through moral sacrifice. Additionally, Marty highlights Dwight Eisenhower as the normative performer of the president's priestly role in the tradition of civil religion, as the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge during his first term in 1954 (Pintér).

Another key expression of American civil religion is the phrase "In God We Trust," which became the official national motto of the United States when it was enacted into law by Congress in 1956, during Eisenhower's presidency. Although the phrase first appeared during the Civil War, it was not officially adopted as the national motto until nearly a hundred years later. "In God We Trust" is engraved on all forms of the country's currency and written on every coin and bill. It is often discussed as an illustration of the most ubiquitous and enduring character of American civil religion (Lienesch 1-2).

Overall, these components, including symbols, rituals, speeches, and shared national values, reflect the essence of American civil religion and also serve as powerful forces that bind Americans together.

3.4. The Role of Civil Religion in Fostering a Unified American Identity

Bellah's concept of American civil religion is the story of a community united by a shared religious heritage and a common destiny and purpose. It suggests a national faith uniting all Americans under a shared belief (Cristi 68). Scholars have depicted it as a cohesive force, a shared framework of values that promotes social and cultural integration (Demerath and Williams 154).

Sociologist Robert Bellah introduced the concept of CR to show how Americans could coexist with a shared set of religious and political beliefs, even though they belonged to different religious groups. This shared belief system was seen as a way to connect individual American minds to the spirit and values of the entire nation. It was also viewed as a necessary condition to build a good society for the American people, morally, spiritually, and materially (Li and Froese 772).

Civil religion in the United States is used to describe the relationship between religion and national identity. The basic theory asserts that an informal civil religion connects the American people to God. This civil religion fosters an ideal unity and purpose comparable to that associated with more traditional faiths, which diffuses American thought and culture with a sense of divine favor intrinsically linked to American political and social institutions and norms (Thompson).

Civil religion acts as an integrative force in society and the glue that keeps Americans together. Bellah views CR primarily as integrative. Many authors agree that American civil religion is an important factor in nation-building. It maintains the moral order of society and

provides Americans with a sense of national identity and collective solidarity, uniting them in a moral community. Its essential role is to create, validate, and honor a shared national heritage.

Analysts also agree that civil religion serves as a link between the citizen and the nation. Consequently, it is viewed as a driving force for achieving national objectives. American civil religion is believed to enhance national cohesion, maintain dedication to national goals, celebrate American culture and way of life, and ultimately legitimize American society (Cristi 70).

Civil religion achieves this integration by offering a sense of ultimate significance for the community. Although traditional faiths or denominations divide the allegiances of citizens, CR can provide a framework of beliefs regarding the nation that all citizens can unite around. This belief in CR conveys Americans' conviction of their country's exceptionalism by representing what they see as America's sacred mission. These beliefs are evoked by sacred symbols (the flag), sacred rituals (reciting the pledge of allegiance), sacred objects (the Liberty Bell), sacred holidays (Independence Day), sacred locations (the Lincoln Memorial), and sacred figures (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln). Through these elements, Americans express their pride, feel united, and recommit to the country's values and mission (Harvey and Blum 92).

Civil religion binds all the members of American society together, despite the differences in religion, race, and social background. It builds a sense of unity and solidarity and thus promotes nationalism. It fosters a national identity through various civic rituals and

ceremonies in which individuals from different backgrounds participate, helping them feel like they are part of one nation (Thompson).

Sociologists Demerath and Hammond argue that civil religion can be one of several ways to achieve moral unity in a modern, diverse, and religiously plural society. Because religious groups in America often disagree on theology and doctrine, they have not been able to provide this moral integration. This failure has made civil religion a stronger force for bringing people together. Religious pluralism, by preventing any single religion from dominating the religious symbol system, has created a need for a universal meaning system. This need is seen as the true source of the civil religion, which has emerged to fill the gap left by divided religious traditions (Cristi 71).

Civil religion as a source of integration is at the heart of Bellah's ideas; however, in some of his writings, especially in his book entitled *The Broken Covenant*, he warns that the integrative role of American civil religion may not always be fulfilled. He writes, "Today, the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell" (142).

Moreover, Bellah also recognizes that civil religion has not always led to integration, not only in the present but also throughout American history. In discussing the American Revolution and the Civil War, he acknowledges that loyalty to the principles of civil religion resulted not in social integration but in violent conflict that nearly destroyed the nation.

He expresses a similar concern about the Vietnam War, which weakened the American people's shared beliefs, leading to division and cultural confusion instead of social cohesion. Interestingly, these remarks emerged about eight years after his original article. Over time, as

more criticism and negative responses surfaced, Bellah appeared to shift his position from viewing civil religion as a source of unity and balance to acknowledging its role in conflict. Nonetheless, he recognizes that civil religion can lead to both integration and division, harmony and tension (Cristi 72).

Since sociologist Robert N. Bellah introduced the concept of civil religion, scholars have debated its meaning, function, and implications. Many sociologists asked about the reality of ACR and if it is similar to nationalism or not. One critique argues that the concept of civil religion should be replaced by nationalism because it centers on a dominant language of American nationalism, and one that has largely reflected the culture of the Anglo-Protestant majority (Danielson 1).

Some scholars suggest that civil religion tolerates violations of the First Amendment (Lidz 17). Contrary to his critics, Bellah argues that this civil religion is not exactly opposed to the First Amendment, or the idea that religion must remain separate from political affairs. In his argument, Bellah states, “the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension.” This means that while the Constitution prohibits the establishment of an official religion, it does not eliminate the possibility of a moral or symbolic religious presence in public life.

In fact, Bellah argues that the rhetoric does not reference any specific ideology linked to traditional religion. For instance, the word God used by Kennedy does not refer to the Christian God, or any other specific God from any particular religious sect. Rather, the term is meant to appeal to a symbol that most Americans can comprehend, recognize, and relate to,

regardless of their faith. This kind of symbolism is an example of an expression of civil religion that serves to unite the American people together by providing a common values that allow citizens from different backgrounds to connect to one another and create a cohesive American identity (Gwydir 3-4).

Other scholars argue that civil religion does not represent an accurate historical account but rather promotes a national myth. They believe it presents an idealized vision of unity while ignoring the darker aspects of American history, such as slavery, forced assimilation, and exclusion. Instead of being based on facts, civil religion transforms socially constructed ideas into natural and timeless beliefs. Critics suggest that promoting civil religion, especially during times of crisis, is more of a nationalist project than a historical one (Danielson 2).

For scholar Will Herberg, in other words, American civil religion was something quite distinct from authentic religion and might be more accurately understood as nationalism or, as he describe it, "idolatry." Civil religion, in this sense, emerges from the belief and history of society and becomes an idolatrous faith, where the nation itself is treated almost like a god, competing with particularistic religions rooted in a reality and traditions transcending the common life of a people (Richey and Jones 16).

Religious scholar Charles H. Long critiques ACR as the cultural language of racial nationalism. It interprets U.S. political culture and history from the perspective of white Christian European immigrants, whose freedom depended on the exploitation of African labor and expropriation of Indian lands and cultures. Founding myths, such as the Puritan belief that they were on a divine mission in a new land, and documents such as the Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution, depended upon the erasure of African-American and Indigenous history and indeed denied their humanity (Danielson 4).

A key interpretation of American civil religion is what scholars call Protestant civic piety. This view highlights the strong influence of Protestant values on American national identity, especially during the nineteenth century. Historians like Yehoshua Arieli refer to this as Protestant nationalism, a blending of Protestant religious beliefs with patriotic sentiment (Richey and Jones 17).

Scholars who support this view argue that civil religion reflects a Protestant covenantal nationalism that inspires the people with a sense of national autonomy, unity, and identity as a chosen nation bound by a sacred agreement with God. It also promotes the idea of a Christian America, where being a true citizen means embracing the culture and values of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Though civil religion was intended to unite the country by promoting shared religious values, its values stemmed primarily from white Protestant culture. The celebration of religious freedom was rooted in the liberty of various Protestant groups rather than in a broad sense of religious diversity. This idea helped minimize class conflict by uniting white Protestant elites with the majority Protestant public. Nevertheless, individuals who were not white or not Protestant were often excluded. Thus, civil religion was founded on Protestant beliefs and primarily catered to the interests of white Protestant dominance.

Furthermore, ACR has always contained racist and favoritism sentiments. Bellah explained that, “behind civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen

People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth” (Bellah 18). However, the interpretation and representation of these biblical symbols were primarily influenced by white Protestant theologies and practices (Li and Froese 772-773).

Scholars have criticized civil religion for excluding other religious traditions, such as Judaism, Catholicism, and Black communities, and for causing indirect forms of discrimination and social exclusion toward non-Judeo-Christian groups like Muslims and atheists. Leo Marx describes it as an "uncivil civil religion" that excludes non-Protestant voices and enforces a narrow idea of who truly belongs in the nation (Richey and Jones 17).

Additionally, many argue that the concept of civil religion in America has become difficult to maintain in today's society due to factors like multiculturalism, rising anti-war sentiment, increasing religious diversity, secular individualism, and the decline of traditional religious authority (Li and Froese 773).

In sum, the concept of civil religion in America plays a complex and contradictory role in shaping national identity. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah view it as a unifying force that provides moral order, national cohesion, and a shared sense of identity among all American citizens. However, as both the political landscape and the demographics of America changed in the late 20th century, Bellah began to rethink his ideas. In 1975, he published *The Broken Covenant*, where he expressed concern about rising self-interest, social division, and people feeling disconnected. It appeared to him that civil religion was no longer able to provide the unity and sense of shared belonging he had earlier discussed, and he called American civil religion a "broken and empty shell."

The historical development of civil religion in America illustrates how the nation's civic life has been shaped by religious principles and key national events. The founding fathers drew on religious ideas to establish a moral foundation for the republic by incorporating their religious principles into their political systems. Indeed, whenever major events occurred, such as the Revolution, the Civil War, or moments of national crisis, they added new meaning and symbols to the national story and became part of civil religion.

Civil religion is a quasi-religion that binds all Americans together during national events. Despite the specific elements of religious belief of each citizen, Americans, in general, share certain common aspects of religious orientation. These common elements play a crucial role in the development of American institutions and provide a religious dimension to the entire fabric of American life, including the political sphere.

While American civil religion has helped bring people together by creating a shared sense of identity and promoting unity across different religious groups, some critics argue that it often hides the unfair parts of American history and only presents a positive version of the past. They state that civil religion claims to unite all Americans, but it often excludes certain groups. This indicates that people are still trying to understand what it truly means to be American. Civil religion remains a complex and contested term that continues to provoke debate and even confusion among scholars of religion in the United States.

Conclusion

Religion is and has always been central in American culture and civilization. It has shaped politics, social norms, and identity. Throughout the colonial period and into present day, the United States has experienced successive waves of immigration that have brought immigrants from all around the world and contributed to the religious landscape of America today.

One of the founding principles of the United States is the commitment to religious liberty, which has allowed numerous religious groups to enter and grow in the country. Today, America is a nation with a very significant religious diversity, and nearly every world religion is practiced there. The majority of the American population adheres to Christianity, but there are also population groups adhering to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, in addition to individuals who are atheists and agnostics.

Religious diversity is one of the characteristics of the multicultural America society. However, this religious diversity is also a source of tension and conflict between religious groups. Religion can also be used as a justification for discrimination against certain groups or even for promoting violence or antisocial behavior.

The American government has made various efforts to strengthen tolerance among religious groups through laws and policies that support religious diversity and establish institutions of dialogue between religions to promote the values of tolerance and harmony. These efforts are centered around the model of religious pluralism, which encourages the liberty of religion and the coexistence of multiple faiths.

Every individual and group exist under one system and have equal access to all social services. They have the right to practice their beliefs without discrimination or unfair treatment thanks to the Founding Fathers, who were deeply religious and incorporated their beliefs into the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, in particular, guarantees freedom of religion and allows diverse faith practices to be expressed without fear of persecution or punishment.

Nevertheless, there are still problems and challenges in constructing a unified American identity. The absence of an official religion in the country, while ensuring religious freedom, also challenges social cohesion and raises complex questions about national identity and patriotism. Historically, various paradigms have been introduced to define what it means to be American in the light of religious diversity.

One of the earliest and most well-known of these frameworks is the WASP identity, an acronym for White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, the term used to describe the first settlers of white Protestant origin who sought religious freedom in the New World. Often associated with Puritan values, this group has held considerable power, affecting laws, religious practices, and cultural norms for most of the history of the United States.

The WASP identity has been seen in exclusionary contrast to Catholics, Jews, Irish, immigrants, southern or eastern Europeans, and the non-Whites, and it has declined due to the growing religious pluralism that characterizes America today. In the mid-20th century, a new framework emerged to redefine American identity in a more inclusive way: the Judeo-Christian tradition, a concept that highlights the shared moral and ethical values of Judaism

and Christianity, aiming to unite Protestants, Catholics, and Jews under a common cultural foundation during national crises such as World War II and the Cold War.

This paradigm has been criticized by many scholars and theologians; they argue that it is an unreliable basis for establishing a shared American identity because it has separated Americans far more than it has united them. The tradition broadened the religious narrative beyond Protestantism and assisted in integrating Catholics and Jews into the American religious and cultural framework, while at the same time excluding other religious groups, notably Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, as well as atheists and secularists.

The exclusion of Islam from the Judeo-Christian paradigm reveals that this tradition is not rooted in theology alone; rather, it reflects political motivations and serves particular political interests. Islam has been present in America since its early history, it is an Abrahamic faith, and holds a significant place within the nation's societal fabric.

Hence, it is clear that both paradigms fail to depict the religious-makeup of contemporary America, there are continuous debates about the most accurate description of the wildly diverse religious landscape in the country. Scholars argue that America's real religion, which connects all Americans and gives them a sense of shared identity, belonging, and unity, is a common set of values, rituals, slogans, and symbols, often referred to as 'civil religion.'

In America, there is a belief in God that is not tied to any specific religion. The American God is undefined and is part of the so-called civil religion. Sociologist Robert

Bellah assumed the existence of a common religion in the United States which integrates all citizens in a specific form of sacred patriotism, regardless of their particular denomination.

American civil religion is also regarded as another version of the “American Way of Life”. It is a set of beliefs, values, and rituals referring to the American country and cultivated in a purely religious manner. For example, national holidays are considered both patriotic and religious, and symbols such as the flag, the Constitution or the Pledge of Allegiance are given a sacred dimension. Nevertheless, the core of civil religion is made up of the presumptions of being a nation chosen by God and of the divine right to the president’s authority. Civil religion, in general, has united and bound people of different religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds under one civic identity.

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