Civil Religion, Technocracy, and the Private Sphere: Further Comments on Cultural Integration in Advanced Societies

ROBERT E. STAUFFER

Department of Sociology Kalamazoo College

The thrust of the civil religion literature has been called into question by the work of both Luckmann and Fenn. These latter scholars—here called privatists—deny the need for wide cultural legitimations in advanced societies, suggesting especially that dominant institutions are guided by and accepted in terms of functionally rational criteria rather than broad ideological schemes. However, the privatists (and the "end of ideology" school they represent) overlook evidence suggesting the continued importance of cultural consensus—at least among the dominant classes—and they overlook the possibility that functional rationality itself is a legitimating system of meaning. Further, the privatists ignore the likelihood that emergent social strains will exacerbate dissensus and create new pressure for explicit civil legitimations. Thus, while itself requiring modification, the analysis of civil religion remains crucial for students of religion.

At least since Durkheim, sociologists of religion have been fascinated with the possibility that national or civil symbol systems represent a modern functional alternative to traditional religious systems as sacred legitimations of the social order (Durkheim, 1961: 475-76). Contemporary expressions of this theme may be found in Warner's analysis of Memorial Day ceremonies (1962), Shils' and Young's essay on the essentially sacral meaning of the British Coronation (1953), Herberg's critique of the "American Way of Life" as a religion (1960: 72-98), Verba's analysis of the primordial civil attachments allowing for a smooth transfer of power subsequent to the assassination of John Kennedy (1965), Bellah's eloquent dissection of the American "civil religion" (1967), and elaborations on Bellah's work by both Hammond (1968) and Cherry (1970). Even Lipsitz, in a pithy critique of the "or-

^{1.} Bellah and Cherry insist that the American civil religion has both conservative and prophetic functions, that it provides a set of ideals by which reality may be judged. As Bellah puts this, "... the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality..." (1967: 18). While this issue is really too complex to deal with here, one is reminded of Edelman's critique of symbolic politics (1964), political symbol manipulation which gives the illusion of moral commitment and change and which hides the true

der theory" bias of much of this literature, accepts the basic argument that the modern state has a "religious" character with legitimating implications (1968).

Recently, however, the argument has been challenged, indirectly by Luckmann (1967: 77-117) and more explicitly by Fenn (1972). In this paper, I shall describe the nature of this challenge and then suggest how Luckmann and Fenn, while raising important issues, have partially misapprehended certain factual matters and partially misinterpreted the thrust of their own analyses. Basically, I shall argue that contrary to these scholars, broad cultural legitimations persist, that their nature is becoming increasingly subtle, and that the future may give rise to even others.²

LUCKMANN'S AND FENN'S ANALYSES

Luckmann argues, in brief, that in modern Western societies, the dominant institutional spheres—the polity and the economy—are concerned largely with functional rationality, with efficient attainment of institutionally specific goals. Consequently, institutional norms themselves only delineate functional performances within the institution; they are not prescriptions for general social behavior. One is a citizen; one is an employee. But in neither case does the role carry with it "meanings" about one's total self. It follows that traditional religious institutions (churches) also find their role specialized, since their historical symbols and norms, developed as overall legitimations when societies were less differentiated are neither appropriate nor necessary when functional rationality displaces legitimatizing belief systems in the dominant institutions. There now emerges a "private sphere," wherein individuals construct their own systems of meaning. Churches compete with various "secular" agencies in providing the elements for these systems. Thus, Luckmann's implication is that modern, differentiated societies can do without, in fact cannot sustain, overarching cultural legitimations. The concept of a sacralized civil belief system is not to be found in his analysis.

Fenn's argument is similar, though more developed. He openly states that modern societies (he refers mainly to the United States) no longer need nor can they attain the cultural integration they had in the past. One reason for this is that political behavior now tends to be organized instrumentally, i.e., it is important to people largely insofar as they receive exterior rewards which are consistent with prevailing standards of distributive justice. Questions of "proper management and administration" predominate, and "duly established priorities, effectiveness, and propriety become the primary sources of legitimacy" (Fenn, 1972: 21, 28). This of

processes of political life. Thus, while Martin Luther King was virtually sanctified following the assassination, his commitment to the dream of justice and equality has yet to be taken very seriously by political elites, much less transformed into reality.

One scholar has taken issue with Bellah on another point. Wilson (1971) argues that the civil religion Bellah describes should not really be considered a religion, inasmuch as it is relatively incoherent and noninstitutionalized. This reaction really reflects a disagreement about the definition of religion. I for one would argue that a preoccupation with institutionalized religions, while conducive to "neater" formulations, is also blinding to important and otherwise unstudied phenomena.

2. I would like to thank Robert McMahon for initially raising with me some of the ideas explored in this paper.

course is an elaboration of the functional rationality theme. Fenn also suggests that overarching values relevant to work motivation or extended family ties are becoming less necessary or applicable as technology replaces manpower and as geographic mobility becomes the norm. And again echoing Luckmann, Fenn argues that new and more appropriate values—for example, values extolling leisure or the nuclear family—will be devoid of "utilitarian significance for the occupational system" (1972: 21) and therefore provide no basis for a new overall cultural consistency.

Finally, Fenn contends that existing cultural pluralism not only relativizes all meaning systems, thus countering attempts to impose any single one on the society as a whole, but also provides outlets for frustrations and tensions by affording alternative bases for recognition. Some conflict persists, of course, as "value absolutists" (Parsons' term, which Fenn uses) organize social protest movements, but these cannot succeed in imposing new overarching cultural systems.

In sum, Fenn argues that the sociology of religion should reject the Durk-heimian functionalist perspective because its fundamental assumption is anachronistic. Instead, the discipline should conceive of religion simply as expressive behavior which *may* provide individuals with personalized meanings but which does *not* serve any important society-wide, integrative functions.

A central notion guiding both Luckmann's and Fenn's analyses is, of course, that of an "end of ideology." Both writers acknowledge their debt to Bell (1960) in this regard, and Fenn states that while "'partial ideologies' may develop around separate sets of interests in advanced societies . . . a 'total ideology' cannot now develop which could mobilize the passion and intelligence of an entire population" (1972: 16). And it is clear from the overall context of Fenn's argument that the "separate sets of interests" refer not to two or three highly mobilized groups, with clearly defined political beliefs and locked in dramatic conflict, but rather to a much more pragmatically-tinged pluralist model. It is within this model, moreover, that sense is to be made of an image of political elites as managers and experts, arbitrating interests and applying specialized knowledge to decision making which is purported to be in the best interests of the collectivity.

Where Luckmann and especially Fenn actually have innovated is in suggesting that given such a political system—a technocracy if you will—not only ideologies in the narrow sense (for example Marxism) but overarching cultural legitimation systems of any kind are unnecessary or divisive. Conceivably they would not carry their argument to the point of precluding the functional importance of a sacred aura surrounding central symbols of the political system as a whole, although this is not clear. Surely, however, they would reject the significance of more fully artiulated national mythologies, such as the civil religion described by Bellah. As Fenn writes, "American may no longer be able to agree on ultimate ends or on what is worth doing, but only on what is feasible or 'appropriate'" (1972: 18).3

^{3.} It is only fair to note that Bellah himself saw an emergent crisis in the American civil religion, though he attributed this not to technocracy but to the increasingly problematic role of a rich America in a world of poverty and turmoil. His response to this crisis, as exemplified by the war in Vietnam, was to call for a reinvigorated prophecy and an internationalized civil religion.

A CRITIQUE OF LUCKMANN AND FENN

Have Luckmann and Fenn inadvertently raised a valid objection to much of the civil religion literature? More generally, is cultural integration really no longer a functional problem in advanced Western societies and thus an intellectual problem for students of contemporary meaning systems? I want to argue that both questions must be answered in the negative but that the issue is more complex than either the "civil religionists" or Luckmann and Fenn (whom I shall refer to as the "privatists") suggest.

First, there is some evidence suggesting that the political systems of advanced Western societies are not as unaffected by relatively traditional cultural legitimations as the privatists imply. After reviewing extensive empirical studies concerning sociopolitical attitudes and sentiments in the United States and England, Mann concluded that while consensus is not pervasive, (1) greater consensus exists among middle than among working or lower classes; (2) support for deviant values among the latter groups tends to occur when the values are defined in terms of "concrete everyday life" or "populistic" imagery rather than in terms of "abstract political philosophy;" and (3) people in the middle class tend to be more internally consistent about their values than are working- or lower-class individuals (1970). Mann's interpretation is that the functional problem is perhaps not that of achieving overall consensus but rather maintaining consensus among the powerful and actively discouraging a deviant consensus from emerging among the relatively dispossessed. Further, on the basis of a review of political socialization studies, he suggests that a possible consequence of such socialization is indeed to preclude the development of more coherent and abstract deviant values. This argument implies that the absence of cultural consensus within the whole population, or ideological conflict between major segments, does not attest to the irrelevance of cultural legitimations but rather to the need for specifying more precisely the role they play within the social structure. Conversely, the argument suggests that sacralized civil symbols and myths may play a more important role in undercutting the articulation of fundamental grievances than they do in creating and sustaining overall commitment to the system. If the lower-class child early on learns to identify with the President in a deep and diffuse way (Verba, 1965: 352), then later hostilities may not be directed toward the federal government as a result of this deeply internalized sentiment. Similarly, socialization into a view of America as a nation invested with a unique commitment to freedom and justice (Bellah, 1967) may serve to prevent alternative understandings from developing when experiences contradict ideals. In sum, the thrust of Mann's argument is not in keeping with the privatists' interpretation, though with modifications it can be integrated with the civil religionists' perspective.

But let me carry the argument a step further. I have written thus far as if the "end of ideology" thesis were an argument of relevance only to academicians concerned with achieving an empirically adequate theoretical understanding of how modern societies operate. But the thesis is more than this. As numerous writers have pointed out, the "end of ideology" argument, whatever its scientific worth, is itself a legitimating belief system, not only for intellectuals newly accepted into the

corridors of power (Haber, 1968), but also as a more pervasive sympathetic interpretation of the status quo (Birnbaum, 1969; 81; Delany, 1969; 311-14; Habermas, 1970: Harrington, 1966: 131-41: Kleinberg, 1973: 41). Specifically, the "end of ideology" position stresses that public debate of broad policy alternatives would not only be insufficiently sophisticated but actually irrelevant, since today's problems lie not in the overall structure of society but in minor aberrations of that structure. It seems obvious that if this argument is accepted by people who are not "experts" in policy questions it will discourage them from critical reflection on the society. Insofar as the masses believe that public issues are too complex to understand, they will be disposed to let "knowledgeable" and "well-advised" leaders make the big decisions, secure in the knowledge that affairs of state are in competent hands. This disposition in turn provides leaders with a great deal of freedom to manage the society and bargain among themselves in accordance with a narrow, self-serving set of interests. They need only declare that their decisions are for the common good. It is an empirical question as to whether this is in fact what leaders do. But clearly it is sociologically unsound simply to posit an absence of cultural legitimations, since technocratic assumptions may well enter into the consciousness of the public and thereby legitimate technocratic rule.4

Recognition of this point in fact clarifies an ambiguity in Fenn's analysis. Recall his argument that contemporary sources of legitimacy include propriety and conformance with "duly established priorities." This begs the big questions of why one political action is considered more proprietous than another and on what basis priorities are duly established. There has to be some underlying cultural interpretation which defines and legitimates the *form* of propriety involved and the legal basis for setting public priorities. Interestingly, while the original inspiration behind Luckmann's and Fenn's analyses is clearly the work of Max Weber, the latter explicitly defined legal-rationality as a *type* of cultural legitimation, not the absence of same, and even partially recognized that legal-rationality provided a screen behind which bureaucrats could act "irresponsibly" (Weber, 1958: 77-128). Yet as both Marcuse and Habermas have observed, even Weber did not observe the extent to which legitimation through legal rationality may protect the existing structure of interests in a society (Israel, 1971: 110-11).⁵

It is my contention that the apparent deideologization of American and other advanced societies which Luckmann and Fenn presuppose is really a reflection of an emergent belief system.⁶ This system obviously does not "mobilize the passion"

^{4.} Thus when John Kennedy, in a speech at Yale in 1962, noted that "the problems... of the Sixties... demand subtle changes for which technical answers—not political answers—must be provided" (quoted by Rousseas and Farganis, 1963), he was contributing not to a diminution of cultural legitimations but rather articulating a new form of legitimation.

^{5.} The Weberian point is reiterated by McFaul in a comment on Fenn's article. "Efficiency, managerial rationality and efforts to control all reflect value commitments. There are, after all, alternatives to these types of social organization" (McFaul, 1973: 235). Again, however, little consideration is given to the possibility that such values may function to distort the continued existence of divergent class interests and thus legitimate the status quo.

^{6. &}quot;Emergent" in this context does not mean that functional rationality is itself a new phenomenon but only that it seems to be playing a more central role in the worldviews of numerous members of society. Historically, functional rationality has had more competition from nationalist or traditional religious systems of meaning. This is not to say, of course, that functional rationality has completely or success-

of the populace—far from it; but it does involve a view of history, society, and change which, when widely shared, provides a supportive cultural basis for technocratic rule. I recognize that privatization processes are occurring but would argue that they are occurring in part because people have accepted the ideas of technocracy and thus accepted their own political impotence. Further I grant that people tend to remain politically placid when economic growth contributes to material comfort, another tenet of the end of ideology theory, but I submit that this is so in large part because (1) increasing material comfort has been defined as the ultimate goal of life (see for example, Kleinberg, 1973: 190-93) and (2) alternative routes to material well-being have been defined as either nonexistent or else too costly in other terms. Concerning this last point, a keystone of technocratic legitimations has been the argument that socialism is inherently totalitarian and therefore no alternative at all.

It should be clear, moreover, that a perspective which emphasizes the presence of technocratic elements in the overall cultural legitimation system also implies a partial rethinking of the civil religion argument. This argument has focused almost exclusively on traditional national symbols (whether people, events, artifacts, or ideals) rather than including an awareness of emergent technocratically inspired sentiments and symbols. Further attention, for example, needs to be paid to the kinds of awe and devotion inspired by expertise (including credentialism and professionalism) and to ways in which traditional nationalist symbols are strengthened by association with technocratic elements. An example of the latter would be the increasing "magnificence" of presidential power when centralization of decisionmaking in the executive branch occurs and is justified in terms of the necessarily secretive and intricate complexities of foreign policy or the esoteric knowledge purportedly required for long-range economic planning.⁷ On the other hand, however, it is possible that the infusion into meaning systems of technocratic ideas may be checked by other meaning elements. Recall Mann's point that working- or lowerclass values, when divergent from those of the middle class, are often populist in character and thus conflict sharply with the technocratic theme of deference to expert rule. We might expect, then, that technocratic meanings will often be resisted by working-class people and that their resistance will sometimes take the form of large-scale protests legitimated by populist values. In any event, the interrelationships between the themes of the civil religion, populistic variations of this religion, and the technocratic worldview need to be studied both on the level of individual systems of meaning and on the level of cultural legitimations or threats to these legitimations.

fully replaced or will replace other systems of meaning. Nor do I mean to imply that adequate empirical confirmation of my argument currently exists. I believe, however, that confirming data can and should be collected.

^{7.} Unquestionably, the ongoing revelations of the Watergate scandal will provide a temporary check on public acceptance of and veneration for centralized presidential power. However, it is most unlikely that this crisis will undermine the general trend toward strong executive rule legitimated in terms of expert knowledge and control. Indeed, what is interesting about Watergate in this regard is not that expertise failed but that "politics" appeared to have intruded too overtly and crassly into the domain of expert societal management. A probable outcome, then, will be an increased emphasis on ostensibly apolitical, technocratic rule.

THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF TECHNOCRATIC LEGITIMATION

I have argued that Luckmann and Fenn have erred in overlooking the possibility that a technocratic political system must have its own legitimating ideas and that these do enter into the worldviews of the populace and affect its behavior. But there is an additional problem with the technocratic thesis. The technocratic system will work, and its legitimations be accepted, only when social problems can be solved, or appear to be solved, through expert manipulation of the social system. If the system is actually incapable of problem solving, and this insufficiency cannot be hidden from the public, then conditions will be ripe for a reemergence of open ideological debate and elites in particular will feel a need for new and more explicit cultural legitimations to ward off major conflict. Is such a prospect likely?

To answer this question satisfactorily would carry us beyond the scope of available social science knowledge. To avoid the question, however, is to dodge the responsibility of trying to understand the strains of modern societies and what these strains imply for cultural analysis. Let me therefore speculate briefly by suggesting two points at which American society may face emergent crises that may threaten existing cultural legitimations.⁸

First, as already noted, American technocratic functioning partially depends on continued economic growth. In the main, Americans appear willing to accede to expert rule when their real income is increasing or can be expected to increase in the near future. That this faith in growth and affluence is itself a part of technocratic legitimations I have suggested above, but once established, it becomes a precondition for the persistence of the system. Further, the technocratic response to problems of poverty has been largely to encourage economic expansion and hope that some of the new wealth will trickle down the socioeconomic hierarchy. This has worked rather well during the past several decades, although serious inflationary problems have resulted and a great deal of dependence on military and aerospace expenditure has been necessary. (Obviously not all segments of the population have benefited from the trickle but enough have benefited to maintain commitment by the great majority.) Increasingly, however, fundamental limitations to growth are being noted (Meadows et al., 1972). At present American economic affluence and growth absorb astoundingly high proportions of the world's natural resources. If these resources are depleted before viable substitutes are discovered or if nationalist movements in developing countries succeed in gaining greater control over their own resources, then the productivity of the American economy will necessarily be checked. Should this happen, it is reasonable to expect serious and widespread discontent among a "middle America" grown accustomed to comparative material comfort and among lower-income people, who would find themselves in an increasingly perilous economic situation. Under these circumstances severe problems of legitimation would be bound to arise. They could not be solved by sim-

^{8.} In his comment on Fenn's paper, McNamara also suggests there are limits to "rational manipulation and solution" (McNamara, 1973: 238) but only cursorily refers to the nature of these limits. My purpose in the following paragraphs is to provide a somewhat more detailed analysis of this question and incidentally to imply that challenges to the social order will exceed in scope recent radical confrontations.

ply encouraging people to trust in expert management. Attempts would probably be made to ward off dissent by new appeals to nationalist symbols and myths.

But even without assuming a dire economic crisis of this sort, it is not unreasonable to expect increasing life-style dissatisfaction resulting from demographic and environmental problems. Ongoing despoliation of the land, overburdened communication and transportation networks, increasingly populated recreation facilities all contribute to the building of frustrations and hostility among segments of the population. For the time being, reactions to these problems tend to take the form of relatively "quietist" or "introversionist" sects which in Fenn's telling phrase, do not "ask more from the society than it can give" (30). But one should be wary of predicting the future on the basis of present-day responses. Indeed, it seems equally conceivable that current rumblings may generate broader and deeper public antipathy concerning the so-called "quality of life."

The second potential crisis is ironically implied by data Fenn himself presents in defense of his thesis. As already noted, he argues that technological development decreases manpower requirements in the economy and thus lessens the historical cultural problem of sustaining worker motivation. He documents his contention with data showing that the ratio of men in the civilian labor force to all men in American society has declined since 1948. Noting that some of this decline represents longer periods of schooling and lowered retirement ages, Fenn also implies what is common knowledge: rates of unemployment, especially among youth, have increased. The functional problem which thus emerges, according to Fenn, is to lessen work motivation, because "it is when unusually large numbers of individuals insist on participating in the labor force . . . that tensions are likely to occur" (27).

Yet this conclusion is highly deceptive, for it ignores the question of how the unemployed are to live. Obviously, a fundament of American society is still that one must work for his keep, and guaranteed income plans are, as would be expected, enormously unpopular. Whether or not the residues of the Protestant Ethic are "functional," they do exist—widely and deeply. Thus Fenn's sanguine implication that the society, presumably through expert management, will be able to adjust to structurally induced unemployment is dubious indeed. Certainly at the present time, when very high levels of unemployment tend to be confined to lowerclass and minority youth, the consequent hostilities can be controlled. But if automation is to continue replacing human labor (and while the debate on this issue persists, there is reason to suspect that it is true [Seligman, 1966]), then a crisis is not unlikely. Those finding jobs increasingly scarce will demand the creation of new work or else an end to the work-income nexus. Either demand would be quite expensive, and the latter demand threatens deep-seated beliefs; hence both would be resisted by advantageously-placed groups. The result could easily become a conflict of major proportions, not easily dealt with by elite economic manipulation. The seemingly logical response of spreading the available work around (by shorter work weeks, early retirement, etc.) ignores the fact that many victims of technological unemployment are largely unskilled and cannot easily qualify for work. Moreover, a frequent consequence of reduced work hours is working overtime or "moonlighting," thereby eliminating gains in the job-to-labor-force ratio (Carter,

1970). While presumably not the stuff of which actual revolutions are made, the problem of structural unemployment could well test the limits of whatever tension-reduction systems the elite have available. It might tempt them to call again for efforts directed toward mass mobilization around consensual civil symbols and sentiments.

Concerning neither crisis point which I have discussed do I mean to imply that reaffirmations of explicit nationalist ideologies will solve the problem. The point is rather that modern political-economic systems have *not* solved all the important problems, as is implied in the technocratic literature, and that potential future problems may be so great as to test severely the capacity of technocracy and the ideas that legitimate it. It is a good bet that should this come to pass attempts will be made to defuse major conflicts and to reestablish collective solidarity via affirmations of the civil faith.⁹

TOWARD A NEWER SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Sociologists of religion (or more broadly, sociologists of sacred or ultimate meaning systems) must be grateful to Fenn and Luckmann for their provocative insights into the relationship between social structural transformations of modern societies and emergent forms of religious questing and symbolization. Certainly too many careless words have been written about the "integrative function" of religion, on the one hand, and disproportionate attention has been given to "church religion" on the other. Luckmann's notion of religions of the private sphere is an undeniably important one, as is Fenn's demonstration that the phenomenon of cultural legitimation is a complex matter indeed. Yet as I have tried to argue in this paper, these writers have overstated their case and virtually dispensed with the baby along with the bath. 10 The problem for the sociologist of religion in contemporary society is not merely to study privatized meanings or occasions of subcultural expressivity but also to (1) recognize that both persistent and new forms of overarching cultural legitimations, including technocratic beliefs and values, do exist; (2) determine the ways in which these broad legitimations enter into, shape, or set limits upon individual interpretative systems; and (3) become sensitive to persistent or emergent social structural problems or contradictions within modern societies and analyze the degree to which and ways in which consequent strains give rise to open ideological debate or more explicit articulation of cultural sym-

^{9.} Other mechanisms of social control are available, of course, to modern ruling elites, not the least of which is the threat or use of force, and there is no reason to suppose that attempts to maintain stability would be limited to nationalistic propagandizing. On the other hand, naked force directed against substantial domestic opposition runs the risk of further delegitimating elite rule, and thus force would itself have to be clothed in ideological terms.

^{10.} Actually Luckmann is slightly more careful than Fenn. In the postscript to his book, Luckmann writes, "The modern sacred cosmos legitimates the retreat of the individual into the 'private sphere' and sanctifies his subjective 'autonomy.' Thus it inevitably reinforces the autonomous functioning of the primary institutions" (116). Compare this with Fenn: "Secularization therefore does not drive religion from modern society, but rather fosters a type of religion which has no major functions for the entire society" (31, italics in original). Yet even Luckmann errs in his view of the primary institutions as functioning autonomously, as opposed to sustaining a legitimating image of inherent, "it-can-be-no-other" rationality or autonomy.

bols and myths. Regarding this third point, Bellah's essay on civil religion, despite its dubious implication that the national faith can be prophetic as well as justificatory, remains a model of identifying overarching cultural themes as responses to, and interpretations of, national adversity.¹¹

11. It should be clear from the foregoing that I see little value in distinguishing the sociology of ideology from the sociology of religion. Religion may be defined usefully as beliefs and rites which provide an interpretative scheme of the ultimate meaning of life, and thus include a more or less sacred orientation to certain principles, objects, and personages. Ideology, when not used as a polemical concept, refers to a constellation of beliefs, values, and sentiments pertaining to the direction of historical change, the nature of the good society, and thus by implication the desirability and future of the status quo. Therefore, unless one can assume that civil elements are *entirely* absent from individuals' interpretive systems, it is reasonable to think of ideology simply as a component part of religious thought and expression in modern society.

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