INTRODUCING CIVIL RELIGION, NATIONALISM AND GLOBALISATION

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The first years of the 21st century have seen religion and in particular political religion gaining influence in the wake of globalisation and nationalistic responses to globalisation. Moreover, in democratic secular states, religion has become a more pertinent political issue of concern to the nature and role of the state. Holy Nations and Global Identities. Civil Religion, Nationalism and Globalisation is a compilation of works addressing some of the issues underlying this complexity. It brings together theoretical explorations and original case studies on civil religion, nationalism and globalisation from scholars of different fields and creates a basis for future scholars to develop and elaborate on the theories and methodologies of the subjects under investigation. In particular, we have aimed to provide insights from historians, political scientists, sociologists and sociologists of religion. Traditionally, these scholars from different fields have been interested in the same issues, but nevertheless have worked relatively isolated from the developments in their neighbouring disciplines.

The aim of this book is to promote fruitful cross-fertilisation amongst the different disciplines contributing to the study of these complex issues, which we here have delineated with the concepts of civil religion, nationalism and globalisation. It is therefore our hope that the book will reach both scholars interested in these subjects and university students who follow courses in sociology of religion, comparative nationalism and related subjects.

Civil Religion

In the sociology of religion, the concept of civil religion describes phenomena for which the nation is the focal point of sacralisation. Globalisation has presented the nation-states of the 21st century with new challenges, and the continued interest in civil religion is at least partly spurred by the question of how civil religion develops and
changes when an emerging global identity becomes tangible among more and more people. This is a fundamental question, because civil religion has always been linked to issues of national cohesion and the legitimisation of the individual state.

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the term civil religion in 1762, it designated a philosophical construction through which he attempted to understand the role of religion within a frame of Enlightenment thinking. It was never implemented in this form, except perhaps for a brief period in 1794 during the French Revolution when Maximilien Robespierre institutionalised the Cult of the Supreme Being as the new state religion of the French Republic.¹

From a Rousseauian perspective, civil religion is “political religion”—it is a deliberate justification of citizens’ solidarity with their state by referring to higher, unquestionable principles (Cristi 2001, 16–30). Rousseau’s civil religion also legitimises that the liberal, tolerant state must resort to violence when it is challenged by those who are disloyal to the state (Fourny 1987). Disloyal citizens can be expelled or put to death; not because they are heretics to the religious tenets of Rousseau’s civil religion, but because they are subversive to the state. Thus, Rousseau prescribed a drastic “solution” for a recurrent problem of the liberal, democratic state, suggesting how to deal with those citizens who deny the very basis of this state. In particular, this part of Rousseau’s treatise on civil religion is a long-lasting embarrassment (Cristi 2001, 26–30). It can be read as an open door to totalitarian rule in the “best interest of the people”.

The idea of a civil religion as a transcendental legitimisation of a particular state intrigued subsequent philosophers, political scientists and sociologists, and it can be clearly discerned for example in Émile Durkheim’s thinking on religion and society (Pickering 2001). Durkheim and others, however, did not use the term civil religion; perhaps because it was so clearly associated with Rousseau’s work.

It was therefore a conspicuous and bold move when Robert N. Bellah in 1967 used the term civil religion in his classic article “Civil Religion

¹ Rousseau imagined that this civil religion would allow individual freedom in religious beliefs (apart from some basic doctrines). The Cult of the Supreme Being was totalitarian, however, because it did not allow religious freedom, for example, to worship Catholic saints. The Roman Imperial Cult resembles Rousseau’s civil religion in the sense that the purpose of it was not to control the beliefs of the people, but to control their loyalty to the state.