CHAPTER NINE

CIVIL RELIGION IN AN AGE OF CHANGING CHURCHES AND SOCIETIES. A LOOK AT THE NORDIC SITUATION

Pål Repstad

This chapter represents a continuation of a lecture given at a conference for church historians and sociologists in Oslo, almost fourteen years ago, about civil religion in the Nordic countries (Repstad 1995). Some of the topics of that lecture are repeated here, and some reflections upon recent developments are added. At that time, in 1994, the conclusion was that traces of civil religion could be found in the Nordic countries, mainly associated with their state and folk churches. Nevertheless, the intention was not to exaggerate the significance of Nordic civil religion, neither for social and political integration nor for prophetic and critical functions. In Inger Furseth’s words from an empirical study of civil religion in Norwegian history, this is civil religion in a “low key” (Furseth 1994). In this chapter, I summarise some of the Nordic contributions to the discussion about civil religion in the Nordic countries. I also add some tentative comments on possible consequences for civil religion in these countries, especially regarding three trends: 1) the increased ambitions of the national churches in terms of self-government, 2) the changes in the state apparatus as a result of increased globalisation and increased significance of market solutions, and 3) the increased ethnic pluralisation of the Nordic populations.

I must stress at the outset that I have never done any empirical research on civil religion, in the Nordic countries or elsewhere. My role here is to review and reflect upon the work of others. Although this may give me a certain intellectual freedom, as I have no obligation to defend vigorously any conclusions, it is also a disadvantage that fills me with some uneasiness confronting this task. I feel that I am a bit parasitic in this discussion, but I will try to give credit to those who deserve it and who have spent more time than I have in this field of research.
Civil Religion—the Concept

Robert Bellah introduced the concept of civil religion at a conference in 1966, with his content analysis of the religious dimension of the inaugural speeches of American presidents from George Washington to Lyndon B. Johnson (Bellah 1967, 1972). It is important to bear in mind that there are two aspects of Bellah's original reference to civil religion: one concerning this kind of religion's capacity for social and political integration, and one critical-prophetical, activated when people do not live up to the standard expected of a chosen people; i.e., in Bellah's words, when the covenant is broken. In more recent usage, the critical aspect has often been forgotten, and we are left with a more one-sided and banal civil religion, simply the religious glorification of a nation. It is also clear to me from the original usage of the word that Bellah and his associate Philip Hammond had a contextual and normative message for America, a message about ideals of integration, and also about peace-making as part of America's historical mission, although not peace-making by any means. This is not meant to discredit the analytical value of the concept, but maybe we can understand better the broad discussion about civil religion that arose from Bellah's introduction of the concept. Robert Bellah's The Broken Covenant, published in 1975 (originally presented as lectures in 1971), uncovers several critical perspectives on America. In the original pact, the original self-understanding, the founding fathers of America were committed to hard work, but not to becoming rich necessarily. However, according to Bellah, the present economic system in the United States worships the classical sins of mankind, underlining the basic values upon which America was founded. For Bellah, civil religion was never the worship of what went on at any time in the name of the nation (1975; cf. Riis 1985, 11).

In my discussion here about the Nordic countries, I try to focus on the critical as well as the integrative elements of civil religion. It must be emphasised that not only the prophetic part, but also the integrative aspect contain normative ideals. Behind the seemingly more descriptive dimension of civil religion's capacity to integrate people of different backgrounds, it is possible to trace an ideal that people should participate in society in harmonious ways and learn how to handle diversity in a smooth manner.

I must also add some other general remarks on the meaning of civil religion. I am not a functionalist. I do not think that there is or has to be a civil religion in any society. It is an empirical question and of