

Article

The Relevance of the Concept of Civil Religion from a (West) German Perspective

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Abstract: The paper argues for the continued importance and usefulness of the term “civil religion” in light of the (West) German discussion and the situation in Europe. For non-Americans, and especially for Germans for whom terms like “political religion” are tied to the National Socialist past, the concept of civil religion helps explain the relationship of religion and politics, both in modern democracies in general and in Germany and the United States in particular.

Keywords: civil religion; political religion; political theology; USA; Germany; Europe; transnational; Holocaust; migration

1. Introduction

“Obama as Pontifex maximus” ran the headline of a German newspaper in 2013 explaining to its readers that the U.S.-American inauguration was the “high mass” of the nation’s civil religion (Main 2013). Time and again, Germans and Europeans marvel at what they consider to be the bizarre mix of religion and politics on the other side of the Atlantic. They have trouble understanding how the U.S. experience is interpreted in a religious frame. Over the last decade, some German journalists have started using the term “civil religion” to help their readers understand U.S. political rituals (Schwartz 2009; Liebert 2017).

By (re)introducing the concept of civil religion and applying it to U.S.-American society in the late 1960s, Robert N. Bellah both furthered and complicated our understanding of religion in U.S. politics and culture (Bellah 1967). The sociologist triggered a heated debate that led to a multitude of interdisciplinary studies in the United States.¹ Over half a century later, as this special issue attests, scholars around the world still engage in a lively discussion on the definition and usefulness of the concept and its application to countries other than the U.S.

Astonishingly, so far, a transnational exchange on the concept is lacking as most of the literature published in languages other than English is not acknowledged in the United States. We intend to fill this gap and open at least the German intellectual discourse to an international audience.² But, more importantly, while scholars have repeatedly suggested the abolition of the term, we argue that from the perspective of non-Americans the term is necessary and useful. It serves both as an explanation of the (to outsiders) strange mix of religion and politics in the United States and as a helpful concept for other countries such as Germany, in academic circles as well as in the wider public. After all,

¹ Bellah’s article led to various international studies of countries outside the United States such as South Africa or Chile, cf. (Moodie 1975; Cristi 1996); see also the anthology with various case studies published by Bellah and Hammond (1980).

² Please note that our aim is not a concise historiographical overview of the relationship of religion and politics in Germany but rather a contribution to the discussion about the usefulness of the concept of civil religion by discussing literature that explicitly uses the concept. The only historiographical overview of the German debate on civil religion in English so far dates from 1984, cf. (Schieder 1984).

Bellah himself had conceived of the term to help a Japanese audience understand the phenomenon (Bellah 2005, p. 137). Thus, we advocate for the maintenance of the concept of civil religion.

What are the reasons for choosing (West) Germany as a case study, besides our nationality?³ First, after the experience of two world wars and National Socialism, Germany was seeking a (new) foundation on which to base the state. Ideas ranged from a form of political theology to civil religion to basic “core values”⁴ like liberty, equality, tolerance, democratic participation, and religious freedom. In this context, civil religion was and is an important concept. Second, and closely linked to the first point, the (West) German debate perhaps more than any other national debate juxtaposed the concept of civil religion against Eric Voegelin’s concept of “political religion”; the former is commonly understood to be solely found in democracies, the latter usually describes totalitarian regimes. In doing so, German scholars not only sharpened both concepts but they also stimulated a broader interdisciplinary discussion about the relationship of religion and politics.⁵

Accordingly, we will first summarize the beginnings of the discourse in Germany triggered by the debate on core values in the 1970s. The main part of our article focuses on the usefulness of civil religion, first in comparison to other terms, in particular political religion, second with regard to debates within the German Lutheran church, and third in relation to contemporary discussions about 9/11, migration, and a European civil religion.

2. The Beginnings of the Debate in Germany: Civil Religion as the Foundation of the State

Three years after the publication of Bellah’s seminal *Daedalus* article, German scholars first acknowledged the concept (Moltmann 1970). Yet, a lively discussion only started in 1978 when prominent sociologist Niklas Luhmann translated the term “civil religion”⁶ and applied it to his social systems theory. In the following decades, renowned philosopher Hermann Lübbe became Bellah’s German counterpart, partly because of his overlaps with Bellah’s theory, and partly because of his prominent role in the German discussion.

Both scholars responded to the debate about possible foundations for the state sparked by the “rebellious” and increasingly pluralistic 1960s and 1970s. Prominent political philosopher and legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde had advanced the thesis that the liberal, secularized state lives off preconditions it cannot produce itself. He wondered how liberty and human dignity can be guaranteed (Böckenförde 1967). This problem appeared especially virulent in the Federal Republic of Germany, which had been founded in 1949 under the aegis of the Western Allies and could only draw on the experiences of the short-lived democracy of the Weimar Republic.

Luhmann sees civil religion as guaranteeing the state and integrating its citizens, as demanded by Böckenförde. For him, civil religion represents a minimum of shared religious elements including the recognition of core values like liberty, democracy, and fairness. In his social systems theory, civil religion relates to the overall system as a mode of communication between the different sub-systems, for example law, politics, or academia (although it works differently in all sub-systems). In fact, to Luhmann, civil religion rules supreme over religion, which, like Talcott Parsons, Bellah’s Ph.D. supervisor, Luhmann identifies as structure-preserving. Ultimately, to Luhmann, civil religion better adapts to the growing generalization in differentiated societies and reduces complexity. Hence, in his theory, civil religion replaces religion. Accordingly, the sociologist exclaimed that if civil religion did not exist, theory would have to invent it (Luhmann [1978] 1986). Luhmann, as a theorist, certainly added a new

³ On the role of civil religion in East Germany cf. (Schmidt 2003), and partially (Konsultation 1987).

⁴ “Grundwerte” in German.

⁵ For an international (English-speaking) critical assessment of the concept of “political religion” cf. (Burrin 1997; Gentile 2006; Burleigh 2007; Gregor 2012).

⁶ In German, the opposite of “civil” is usually “military.”

level of abstraction to the discussion. However, hereafter he withdrew from the debate and did not answer to his critics, as several German scholars have bemoaned (DiBlasi 2000; Krech 2014).⁷

Hermann Lübbe touched upon Luhmann's work and became one of the key German experts on civil religion. Lübbe defines civil religion as a universal religious consensus whose elements are integrated in the political system. Similar to Luhmann, Lübbe contends that with increasing differentiation, especially between the religious and the political system, the contents of civil religion will become more general. Yet, in contrast to Luhmann, Lübbe argues that civil religion does not necessarily force organized religion to adjust. Rather, both share a reciprocal relationship: civil religion consists of elements of the dominant religions, while the dominant civil religion determines the role of religions in the state. Moreover, for Lübbe, civil religion should not be mistaken for a secular religion with non-religious core values. While Luhmann confines religion's impact to its very own sub-system and sees civil religion as generalized core values linking the subsystems, Lübbe identifies religion as operating in the whole system with civil religion being confined to the social system. Ultimately, for Lübbe, civil religion guarantees the liberal state and religious pluralism against totalitarianism. Hence, Lübbe directly responded to Böckenförde's query about the basis of the state and posited that the liberal state actually lived off civil religion (Lübbe 1986; 2001, esp. pp. 28–31; 2004a, pp. 312–22; see also Perčič 2004, pp. 173–74).⁸

Similar to Bellah, Lübbe has been greatly criticized. Some critics argued that a liberal state should not rely on religious foundations; instead, it ought to look to an enlightened attitude and democratic self-determination (DiBlasi 2000; Dreier 2013, pp. 98–99, 117). Others accused Lübbe of being a “neoconservative” who supposedly was trying to invent a state religion to combat the moral decline of postindustrial society (Habermas 1992; Minkenberg 1997). A third group saw his definition as too vague; for them, it vacillated between consensual religious orientations embedded in political culture, aspects of religious culture integrated into the political system independent of denominations, and a glorification of the state.⁹

One of the most polemic attacks on Lübbe (and on Bellah) came from Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Like his U.S.-American colleagues Will Herberg and Herbert Richardson, Moltmann saw civil religion as equating idolatry and glorification of the state. Subsequently, Moltmann promoted a “new”, critical political theology. In the vein of liberation theology, for him, revolutions and resistance were not merely allowed against authoritarian states. They were also permissible against liberal, constitutional states to protect Christian values and human rights against excessive individualism (Moltmann 1970, 1983). Critics warned that Moltmann's political theology undermined the state that allowed its very existence (Pannenberg 1985; Pavelka 2015, pp. 308–9).¹⁰

In the following decades, Lübbe vigorously defended his conceptualization of civil religion against Moltmann: Precisely because it was guaranteeing the liberal state and had roots outside the political system, civil religion would not sacralize the state and instead would safeguard the fragility of liberal

⁷ Luhmann's article was part, though, of an internationally recognized debate with Jürgen Habermas over the potential of social systems theory. It equally formed part of a controversial discussion between supporters of a conservative civil religion and those favoring a secularized/universalist constitutional patriotism, cf. (Habermas 1991, 1992; Kronenberg 2008). Habermas attributed the cohesion of secularized society not to religion but to communication and the state's own resources, cf. (Pavelka 2015, pp. 211–12).

⁸ Soon, other political theorists, political philosophers, legal scholars, and political scientists turned towards civil religion following the U.S. model, cf. e.g., (Münkler 1996).

⁹ Moreover, Lübbe does not account for atheists (or polytheists) as he views the belief in God as self-evident, cf. (Lübbe 2004a, p. 314).

¹⁰ Theologian Wolfgang Vögele defines political theology differently and argues for a public (and political) theology that investigates civil-religious phenomena critically, both with respect to their denominational beliefs and to core values, cf. (Vögele 2001). On different interpretations of the “old” and “new” political theology, the (partially problematic) works of Carl Schmitt with their criticism of parliamentary democracy as well as on its relation to civil religion cf. (Kodalle 1990; Ooyen 2017). For the Catholic church, the church was to concentrate on its Christian message, which by itself often became political, cf. (Pavelka 2015, p. 313).

institutions. For him, civil religion would stop working once the system no longer guaranteed the liberal values of its citizens, like human dignity, freedom, and security (Lübbe 1982, 1986, 2004a).

Thus, some German scholars latched onto civil religion as a potential legitimacy foundation of the state proving the value of the concept. But there were also voices warning of a new nationalism.

3. Civil Religion and Political Religion

Moltmann had been thinking of National Socialism and German submission to the state when he denounced Lübke's "naive" concept of civil religion. For him, it supposedly shared traits with "political religion" and, thus, revived the "old ghosts" of German nationalism (Moltmann 1983, pp. 125, 127). Writing during the Cold War, Moltmann also faulted Lübke for creating a civil religion that distinguished between friends and enemies, citizens and terrorists, and saw it as leading to a "nuclear Holocaust" (Moltmann 1983, p. 125).

Political religion is a concept that dates from the 1930s. Franz Werfel (1932), Eric Voegelin (1938), and Raymond Aron (1939) had interpreted National Socialism as a form of "surrogate religion" (Werfel), "political religion" (Voegelin), or "secular religion" (Aron). None of the scholars further defined the terms. For instance, Voegelin synonymously used "state religion," "state form of religion," and "state theology" (Voegelin [1938] 1996, pp. 19–20, 24; see also Maier 1997).¹¹

Remarkably, it took about 40 years until Voegelin's concept was taken up again in academia. Until the 1970s, religion remained a marginal issue in discussions about National Socialism (Maier 1997; Seitter 2003). What followed was a heated debate on whether political religion in fascist, nationalist, and communist regimes can actually be described as a religion or should better be described as "religious surrogate," "pseudo-religion," "anti-religion," "political secular religion," or through a process of "sacralization" (Behrens 1997; Hardtwig 2001). Many scholars vehemently emphasized the difference between civil religion and political religion with the latter being defined as totalitarian ideology or religion enforced by the state and in competition with organized religions.

However, in the mid-1990s growing doubts about the usefulness of the concept of political religion for analyzing totalitarian regimes led to a slow shift in the academic discussion. Today, it seems that the majority of scholars find other (holistic) categories such as ideology, political myths, or charismatic leadership better suited (Lübke 1995; Maier 1997; Bärsch 2002; Hockerts 2003; Schreiber 2009).

The German National-Socialist past has significantly shaped the debate on civil religion and continues to haunt German discussions. Using civil religion, relating it to, and differentiating it from other concepts such as political religion and political theology helps to deepen our understanding of the relationship of religion and politics in modern times and of Germany's civil religion. For instance, in 2004, Gerhard Besier and Hermann Lübke organized a conference at the *Hannah Arendt Institut für Totalitarismusforschung* in Dresden. The conference documented the ongoing discussion of civil religion and political religion and was explicitly designed to compare the role of religion in Europe and the United States from a historical, contemporary, and systematic perspective (Besier and Lübke 2005).

Yet, the sole equation of civil religion with transcendence and democracy and of political religion with secularism and totalitarian regimes runs the risk of oversimplification.¹² Civil religion is more complex and its demarcation from political religion is not as straightforward. Like political religion, it has been successfully used by political elites to legitimate certain agendas. At the same time, grassroots organizations have adopted civil religion and protested its manipulation. For many scholars, and for us, there is not one coherent national civil religion but many polyvalent civil religions within one

¹¹ In his later works, Voegelin no longer used the term but discussed ideas of "civil regulation" and "civil theology," cf. (Voegelin [1959] 2000; Voegelin [1963] 2000); see also (Gebhardt 1996; Martino 2017). Interestingly, as a Rockefeller fellow in the late 1920s, Voegelin had experienced U.S.-American civil religion first hand, cf. (Voegelin 1928).

¹² Similarly, the modern concept of civil religion should not be conflated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's original concept of "religion civile", as Rehm does, cf. (Rehm 2008).

society and, hence, layers of sacralization that are part of the “multitrack to modernity” (Gebhardt 2004; see also Dubiel 1990; Ley et al. 2003; Vorländer 2013).

4. The Debate on Alternative Terms and Definitions

If scholars cannot agree on a shared definition of the concepts, an exchange of arguments becomes difficult. Unfortunately, in the past decades, many (not just German) scholars have defined civil religion to fit their arguments, especially with regard to its transcendental aspect which has rightfully been part of its definition since Bellah.¹³ Arguably, every discussion across disciplines runs into the problem of finding a common ground because of potentially different discipline-bound terminologies and understandings. However, when the debate got to the point that the philosopher Lübke and the theologian Moltmann attacked each other for being ill-informed about the discussion in each other’s disciplines the opportunity for a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue was missed.

Similarly, debates about alternative terms have only been partially helpful. Like Donald G. Jones’ and Russell E. Richey’s anthology (Richey and Jones 1974), Heinz Kleger and Alois Müller in 1986 (and in an updated version in 2004) presented a differentiated set of concepts. They suggested the following use of the terms (Kleger and Müller 1986; Kleger and Müller [1986] 2004a, p. 13):

- “bourgeois religion” for private Christianity;
- “religion of the citizen” for moral convictions, political options, and social classification systems, i.e., the philosophy of the enlightened citizen loyal to the state; one of its meanings was civil religion;
- “civil religion” for religious elements in the state and civil society;
- “political religion” for the ideology of a mass movement;
- “state religion” for a specific religion/denomination privileged by the state;
- and “cultural religion” for an affirmation of Western civilization and the remnants of post-confessional religiosity.¹⁴

This classification has clarified the definition somewhat, but the term “religion of the citizen” has not established itself in the German discussion. All in all, civil religion turned out to be the most useful term. It was also discussed by the German (Lutheran) churches.

5. The Lutheran Debate

Not surprisingly, the supposed existence of a civil religion led to heated debates among theologians. Lutherans tried to fit civil religion in with Luther’s teaching of the two empires (the worldly one of state and law and the otherworldly one of God, the gospel, and the church).¹⁵ Fourteen years into the international debate on civil religion, the Lutheran World Federation started an international multiple-year study covering countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Their working definition did not see civil religion as transcendental, but as a basic value orientation that evokes obligations and identity in people (Küenzlen 1985, p. 9; Scheffler 1988). Interestingly, it was German participants in the project

¹³ For instance, Henning Ottmann defends political theology against civil religion because the latter is supposedly lacking transcendence, cf. (Ottmann 2004; see also Schmidt 2003; Sattler 2004). For a clear differentiation of civil religion, political religion, and political theology see also (Nix 2012, pp. 227–310).

¹⁴ In their introduction for the reprint of 2004, Kleger and Müller emphasized that civil religion (as part of the “religion of the citizen”) has also been seen as religious law, as basic values, and as a bridge between denominations. They see it as a lived religion, working from the bottom up, open to criticism, potentially critical of institutionalized religions, and negotiating between religious heritage and political modernity, cf. (Kleger and Müller [1986] 2004b).

¹⁵ So far, scholars have mostly focused on the Lutheran church’s relationship to civil religion. The Catholic theologian Hubertus Zilkens in a book on the relationship between (Catholic) Christianity and the constitutional state from the point of view of Catholic social teaching argues that the church has to insist on being publicly recognized by the state and still respecting pluralism and religious tolerance by the state. He sees the necessity of a civil society as trying to balance conflict between individuals and social entity (Zilkens 2011; see also Kleger and Müller [1986] 2004a, pp. 236–39). Overall, few scholars have grappled with civil religion from a Catholic perspective, though Böckenförde was an avowed Catholic.

who protested against a purely affirmative view of civil religion as bolstering the state (Rendtorff 1987), again, explainable by the German past.

Conditions in Germany appeared to be markedly different from the United States. In Germany, religious and political semantics are rigidly separated while church and state entertain close connections. Cooperation between denominations and the state has become institutionalized, for instance in the assessment and collection of church taxes by the state, in public subsidies for church schools and hospitals, and in religious education in schools (Minkenberg 1997; Schieder 2011).

The final report of the Lutheran church for Germany supported civil religion as a heuristic device interpreted within its historical context, i.e., including emptied elements (e.g., Mother's Day), new elements (e.g., Easter marches for peace), or taboo elements (e.g., parades as in National Socialism). The report saw civil religion as an expression of basic commonalities conferring identity in the face of growing pluralism. The authors traced its sources in Germany not only to Christianity, but also to Islam, common mores, mythology, and esotericism. The report stressed that the function of civil religion was to help tolerate and solve conflicts and to provide critical impulses; as agents of civil religion it identified schools, mass media, the military, and holidays (Konsultation 1987).¹⁶ Some participants, like Wolfgang Pittkowski, even argued that because the German Protestant and Catholic churches had become "folk churches"¹⁷ the two themselves housed several civil religions (Pittkowski 1987).

Demonstrating the importance of civil religion, a debate has been raging between proponents and opponents of the concept of a religion outside of the organized churches in Germany. Harking back to Böckenförde, several theologians argue that it is organized religion and not civil religion that contributes to the legitimization of the state as German churches accept religious pluralism.

Those theologians convinced of the existence of a civil religion in Germany struggle with finding their own role and the role of the churches. The final consultation of the Lutheran World Federation in the late 1980s weighed the pros and cons: Churches should not initiate civil religion but were part of it since civil religion must be part of God's will in the world. But in order not to weaken the role for organized religion the church was to continue to stress the message of the gospel and not to promote civil religion (Konsultation 1987). Wolfhart Pannenberg called for a Christian-inspired re-interpretation of civil religion in the West (Pannenberg 1985; see also Huber 2005). Since Pannenberg ignored the rest of the world, Joachim Matthes, with some justification, warned that the concept of civil religion is too closely tied to western cultures (Matthes 1987).¹⁸ Nearly twenty years later, theologian Wolfgang Vögele argued for a more enlarged role of the churches, especially as the (German) civil religion had become more universal. For him, the role of the church is to analyze and partially transmit civil-religious elements. As an example he cited the German Lutheran church's memorandum on Christianity and political culture from 1997 reflecting on the German state's support of Christianity in the Basic Law/constitution and the role of the church in maintaining (Christian) social values like pluralism and tolerance (Vögele 2001, 2005).¹⁹

In Germany, the best-known proponent of an active role of the churches in civil religion is the practical theologian Rolf Schieder. He has continuously worked on civil religion since the 1980s defining it as the minimum consensus of a religious horizon of a community. According to Schieder, both the state and the churches need civil religion: the former as a basis for loyalty to but also for criticism of the state, the latter for the protection of the plurality of organized religions and as a means to civilize religious conflicts (Schieder 1996, 2001b, 2004). For him, churches should play a central role in the religious education of citizens and thus indirectly influence civil religion. Otherwise, the political

¹⁶ This view was confirmed again in 1999, cf. (Kirchenamt der EKD and Geschäftsstelle der VEF 1999).

¹⁷ In German "Volkskirchen," meaning that the majority of the population belongs to them.

¹⁸ Similarly, Wolf D. Ahmed Aries holds that civil religion is never to be found in societies dominated by Islamic thought, cf. (Aries 2001).

¹⁹ In addition, Vögele urged churches to become more liberal and less patronizing and dogmatic in order to attract adherents of civil religion. Later, Vögele turned to a global cultural interreligiosity, cf. (Vögele 2001; 2007, p. 9).

system would start its own civil religion. The state, in contrast, should leave civil religions (explicitly seen in the plural and for him the basis for every citizen's participation in the state) to the members of religious and values communities (Schieder 1995, 2006; see also Herms 2003).

For the past five decades, theologians have debated the form and role of civil religion in relation to organized religion. They vacillate between negating civil religion and claiming the role of a moral foundation of the state for the churches, on the one hand, and admonishing churches to fill civil religion with their own contents, on the other hand. Thus, for theologians, civil religion is an important concept and in the context of more recent developments it is again being hotly debated across the disciplines.

6. Helping to Explain Recent Developments and the Present

Various scholars have acknowledged the existence of a German civil religion, or, at least, civil-religious dimensions in political culture, in various facets of German society and politics: in Christmas speeches of the president (with Richard von Weizsäcker being declared the “most prominent theologian” of civil religion); in the New Year's addresses of the chancellor; in holidays like German Unification or Memorial Day; in the preamble of the Basic Law mentioning the responsibility towards God; in constitutions of individual states; and in core value catalogues of parties (Schieder 1987, p. 297; Konsultation 1987; Minkenberg 1997; Montenbruck 2015).

Most scholars agree that a critical German civil religion should include German responsibility for and memory of the Holocaust (Rendtorff 1987; Minkenberg 1997). Some scholars might deplore the “negative patriotism” of Germany and argue that a legitimization of German history, given the German past is difficult (Honecker 1990; Isensee 2010), but references to National-Socialist atrocities are a part of Germany's civil religion.²⁰

Just as in the United States, national and international crises in Germany and Europe have sparked debates on civil religion demonstrating the concept's potent analytical value. The terrorist attacks of the Red Army Fraction, the flowering of social movements, and the concomitant pluralization in the 1960s and 1970s made it highly questionable why people should give loyalty to the state (and essentially led to the interventions of Böckenförde and Lübke).

German reunification in 1989 triggered renewed interest in civil religion. The entry of more secularized states into the Federal Republic and therefore a falling percentage of church membership raised questions about the potential loss of a German civil religion. Some argued that civil religion was vanishing after German reunification (Vögele 1994, p. 32; Minkenberg 1997). When, in 1996, the state of Brandenburg voted for ethics instead of religion classes in school, theologians discussed ways to preserve the importance of (civil) religion (Schieder 1995). Others claimed that civil-religious rhetoric might not have increased but was, at least, still present, as demonstrated by the preambles of constitutions of new states that either contained direct religious references or ones that came from a religious background (Daiber 1994).

Yet others see civil religion at its strongest when it is contested. One example is the fierce public debate when non-Christians sued against the display of the crucifix in Bavarian classrooms in the 1990s. In contrast to the Supreme Court of the United States, which in 1984 (and again in 2004) categorized the Pledge of Allegiance as “ceremonial deism” and hence, as a non-religious ritual (Epstein 1996; Copulsky and Kao 2007), the German Supreme Court in 1995 prohibited the crucifix as the sign of a specific faith in classrooms; only the minority opinion declared it to be simply a symbol for the values of the Christian Occident. Lübke and Kleger chastised the Supreme Court for mistaking civil religion for religion (Lübke 1998; Kleger 2001; see also Haydt 2000). Today, after Bavaria changed its law, crucifixes still hang in schools, especially as the European Court of Human Rights allowed it, but they hang in less prominent locations or are removed at the request of pupils or teachers.

²⁰ Schieder, however, warns that the Shoah should not be instrumentalized, neither in the U.S. nor in a German civil religion, cf. (Schieder 2001a, pp. 143, 149).

Furthermore, increased migration to Germany and Europe of especially Muslims in the past twenty years has renewed the debate about the importance of civil religion. Until the early 2000s, Islam only played a minor role in discussions about civil religion in Germany. In 1985, legal scholar Stefan Smid explained that civil religion allows for a historical (Christian) context that still permits Muslims to participate in the state. As civil religion guarantees pluralism and peace and only demands the separation of church and state but not a commitment to core values, Smid sees it as compatible with Islam (Smid 1985).

The role of religion in public was hotly debated in the context of Muslim women wearing headscarves in public. In 2003, emotions rose to a fever pitch when the German Supreme Court decided that a female teacher could not be refused hiring in a state school because she was wearing a headscarf. Schieder supported the verdict on the grounds of religious freedom. He sees the role of the various denominations in teaching pupils a plurality of views in religious classes in school; thus, interreligious teaching serves as the basis of a pluralist civil religion (Schieder 2001a, pp. 129, 170, 193, 199; 2006; see also Puza 2003; Polke 2009, pp. 115, 304).²¹ Five years after the Supreme Court verdict, Böckenförde demanded that for civil religion to work, Islam should recognize religious freedom (as part of the separation of church and state), just as the Catholic Church had done in 1965.²² To him, the secularized state has to expect loyalty to its laws and, in turn, might have to make sure that religions that do not respect the state and its neutrality remain in the minority (Böckenförde 2008).

Moreover, civil religion has come up in debates about a larger commitment to Europe.²³ Examples are the discussions about the Charter of Human Rights of the European Union of 2000, which includes a reference to “spiritual-religious” values in the German but “spiritual and moral heritage” in the French and English versions. Similar debates arose about a European constitution with a possible preamble mentioning religious underpinnings, which only few European constitutions have, including the German one. Kleger has argued that a specific European civil religion exists; for him, besides the obligation to remember the Holocaust (as part of an Atlantic civil religion) it includes basic values like human dignity, tolerance, and solidarity (Kleger and Müller [1986] 2004b; Kleger 2008; see also Heinig 2001).²⁴ In a new project, reminiscent of Bellah’s original idea, Kleger seeks to combine civil religion, world ethos, and a belief in human rights into a civil religion of the world citizen (Kleger and Widdau 2016).

Similarly, political scientists Roland Benedikter and Georg Göschl call for a unifying European (secular) civil religion with a transnationally and transethnically defined set of values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights, all of which the authors historically identify as decidedly “European ideals.” This civil religion should focus on European cultural, political, social, and economic achievements forging a sense of unity and solidarity among European nations (Benedikter and Göschl 2014; see also Hildebrandt 2006; Nix 2012). However, how this civil religion should come into being remains unclear, especially in view of recent populist gains. Already in 2001, the legal scholar Michael Heinig pointed to the failure of a project by the European Commission in the 1990s to create some kind of European civil religion (Heinig 2001). In 2014, Benedikter and Göschl were still hoping for a top-down project by the European Commission (Benedikter and Göschl 2014). One could argue that just as Bellah had come up with the concept of civil religion when he saw it waning during the Vietnam War, increased scholarly interest in a European civil religion has come into being after the rise of nationalism in several European countries (DiBlasi 2000; Prodi 2010).²⁵

²¹ Horst Scheffler even wished to use civil religion as a basis for classes in ethics for soldiers, cf. (Scheffler 1988).

²² His thesis from 1967 had been advanced at the time of Vatican II.

²³ On why civil religion’s presence is weaker in Europe than in the U.S. and why Europe is the “exception” and not the U.S., cf. (Lübbe 2004b).

²⁴ Accordingly, Ines Seiter in a dissertation from 2017 investigated the civil-religious values transported in Holocaust museums in six countries, including Germany, the U.S. and Israel, finding sound knowledge of history and an awareness of human rights, especially tolerance, equality, justice, solidarity, responsibility, (religious) freedom, democracy, and sovereignty of the people, as the basis for civil society, cf. (Seiter 2017).

²⁵ In 2000, in reaction to the election of an Austrian populist government Luca DiBlasi called for the creation of an “antifascist civil religion,” cf. (DiBlasi 2000).

With Germany being a partner in global battles against terrorism and human rights violations, civil-religious mourning rituals of fallen soldiers in Germany have become a matter of debate (Hammer 2015). Hence, 9/11 also had an impact on the debate in Germany, just as in the United States (Cornehl 2004; Fischer 2005). Among many German scholars, civil religion made a “negative” comeback. Particularly the (civil-)religious justifications of U.S. leaders for the Iraq War led to criticism (Perčič 2004; Hammer 2015; Thieme 2018). Oftentimes, civil religion is equated with a U.S. sense of mission. Manfred Brocker has stressed that, in general, rhetoric did not equal realpolitik. He also pointed out that George W. Bush’s use of civil religion after 9/11 was not due to the influence of the New Christian Right or evangelicals as suspected by political scientists like Michael Minkenberg (Minkenberg 1997; Brocker 2003; Brocker 2005).²⁶ Other German scholars have analyzed civil religion in U.S. presidential inaugurations (Bungert 2015), in U.S. patriotic holidays (Weiß 2015), or in presidential campaigns (Emling 2013). They attempt to correct the mistaken view that anything can be justified by a U.S. belief to be God’s chosen people and point out that civil religion(s) also entail obligations and the possibility to fail in living up to past (and God’s) expectations (Bungert and Weiß 2010).²⁷

Overall, most scholars seem to agree on the existence of a civil religion in post-1945 Germany. (Inter)national developments and crises such as German reunification, increased migration, the rise of nationalist governments in European countries, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have brought the concept to the fore and proved its continued usefulness.

7. Conclusions

From a German(-European) perspective, civil religion—despite its partial fuzziness—is a key concept that should be maintained and used further. First, it explains the phenomenon of religion and politics to non-Americans and makes aspects of U.S.-American society and politics easier to understand and analyze. There is no other concept that has the same explanatory and analytical power.

Second, it helps explain the relationship of religion and politics in other countries. This is especially true for Germany due to its past experience with political religion. Debates on civil religion among social scientists, theologians, (and some historians) have seen important resurrections in crises. In line with Bellah’s three turning points for civil religion in the U.S. (the Revolution, the Civil War, and the Vietnam War), one could even argue that there were three similar developments in Germany: National Socialism, reunification, and modern-day migration.

This leads to the third argument for the continuance of using civil religion. Given the refugee “crisis” and hence, Europe’s current third “time of trial” (again coming back to Bellah’s original essay) with the rise of populism, civil religion remains a valuable tool. It is even conceivable that populists are developing their own hybrid civil religion.²⁸ With increased non-Christian migration, and, for instance, (laicistic) France by now having nine percent Muslim population and Germany seven percent, Böckenförde’s question on what to base the state on will again rise to the forefront. Will there soon be a transnational or European civil religion, or will nationalism take over?

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²⁶ In fact, America’s missionary zeal during the Iraq war led some scholars to propose that the U.S.-American civil religion is turning into a political religion, cf. (Gentile 2006, p. 226; Prodi 2010).

²⁷ Furthermore, just as in the U.S., German scholars have applied the concept of civil religion to other countries, like Indonesia, Japan, Soviet Russia, Turkey, or South Africa, cf. (Dickow 1996; Dreßler 1999; Hildebrandt 1996; Jegalus 2009). Kurt Bierschock tried to refute Bellah’s statement that Canada could not have a civil religion and analyzed transitory civil-religious “phenomena” in French Quebec, cf. (Bellah 1980, p. xiii; Bierschock 1993).

²⁸ We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

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