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## UNIT 9 CIVIL RELIGION

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### Structure

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- 9.2 The Concept of Civil Religion
- 9.3 Characteristics of Civil Religion
- 9.4 Varieties of Civil Religion
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### 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit you will be able to

- define the concept of “Civil Religion”
- outline the nature and development of civil religion
- describe some of the varieties of civil religion.

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### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit you have studied the comparative theories of rituals. The next two units have given you examples of rituals found in different societies through the two case studies on the rituals of an African tribe and of Javanese society in South East Asia.

The unit which you are going to study now is also closely related with the ritual and religious aspects of society. But how is this so? To answer this questions you must learn about the close inter-relation between rituals, both secular and religious, and the concept of civil religion.

In this unit, section 9.2 gives you the definition of the concept of civil religion. Section 9.3 briefly outlines the nature and development of civil religion and section 9.4 describes some of the varieties found in different societies during different periods of time. Finally, section 9.5 gives you the summary of this unit.

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### 9.2 THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL RELIGION

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What is civil religion? Why do we need to study this concept? Let us first learn about the meaning and definition of this concept. Civil Religion has been defined as “the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political states” (Nisbet, 1968 : 524-527).

This regard for the civic values and traditions of the political state is expressed through special festivals, rituals, creeds and dogmas which honour great personages and events of the past. These persons, such as freedom fighters and social and political reformers and eminent Presidents like Abraham Lincoln are some of these who have played a major role in the socio-political history of their society. The same is true about the events of great significance to the state and society.

We can give the example of the celebration of our Independence Day, 15th August when our Prime Minister unfurls the National Flag every year on the historical Red Fort in Delhi. Another example is the Republic Day Parade celebrated on the 26th January every year. This celebration too is marked by a semi-religious fervour. It serves to heighten the sense of national and political identity of the Indian citizens. It reminds them of the sacrifice made by our leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad and several others who fought for our Independence.

This kind of semi-religious fervour in celebrating political events and birth days of great persons is found in all societies at all times. It is religious in the sense in which the eminent French sociologist, Emile Durkheim has defined religion.

According to Durkheim, a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that is to say things that are set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. He says that cities and nations are just as susceptible to the nomenclature, i.e., naming of the sacred as are the social bodies called church. He gives the example of France during the French Revolution at the end of the 18th Century (Nisbet, 1968 : 524-527).

Carlton J.H. Hayes' in his Book *Essays on Nationalism (1926)* writes that if we examine human history, we will find that the mainspring of frequency and the force of human movements have been of religious emotion. It is very clear that nationalism had become to a large number of persons a veritable religion which was capable of arousing a deep and compelling emotion which was essentially religious in nature.

He wrote that human history reveals that human beings have always been distinguished by what is called a "religious sense". In other words, they are moved by a mysterious faith in some power outside of themselves, a faith always accompanied by feelings of reverence and usually expressed by external acts and ceremonials (Hayes, Carlton J.H. 1926 : 95).

It is in this context of the sense of religion, the feeling of patriotism or nationalism, of belonging to a distinct socio-political group that we have to understand the concept of civil religion. Civil religion is the religion of an advanced modern society with higher technology. As Nisbet mentions, civil religion has been a highly visible aspect of the modern national state in the West.

In the contemporary period, the most distinct form of civil religion can be found in the American society. You will learn more about civil religion in America in the following sections. Let us first understand the characteristics of civil religion.

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### 9.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF CIVIL RELIGION

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The concept of civil religion is not a new phenomenon. It has been present in many societies from ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance in Western Europe. The ancient sacred kingship of the Mediterranean world had elements of civil religion, such as, the worship of the King or Emperor as a God. This feature has been characteristic of many societies, including our own, in the pre-British period.

The king was supposed to be divinely ordained to rule over his subjects. This aspect was highlighted by rites and ceremonies held at certain times each year. The "rajyabhishek" or the religious ceremony to crown a prince is an example of such a fusion of the political and the religious.

A similar example of fusion of the political and the religious is found in Japanese

history also with respect to the Emperor till at least the World War II. The nineteenth century historian, Fustel de Coulanges, has described in his famous book **The Ancient City (1864)** the civil religions of the ancient Greek and Roman city states. You will learn more about them in the next section of this unit.

As stated earlier civil religion—the quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political state—has been a highly visible aspect of the modern national state in the West. Nisbet says (1968) that this was as a result of certain social, political and historical factors. During the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries destructive conflicts were taking place between the European Protestants and Catholics, the two main sects of Christianity. This period was followed by the period of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment period refers to the Europe of the 18th Century which embodied the spirit of the French philosophers. It marked a radical change from the traditional thinking of feudal Europe (For more details see unit 1, block 1 of ESO-03 : Sociological Thought). During this period the traditional Christianity; as all other kinds of revealed religions; came under attack. This created a vacuum of belief among several groups in Western Europe. At this time efforts were made to establish faith in a deistic god, or a god of nature or progress. This was to replace the traditional conception of Christianity, but this move proved to be unsuccessful.

However, instead of this deistic god what proved to be more effective was the notion of **patrie**. This term was coined by the French philosophers. It refers to a new conception of the political state. For these philosophers a state was one which was paternal, that is, fatherly in its regard for its citizens. For many centuries, the state was considered more or less as a governing body which was the engine of warfare and taxation. Therefore, this new conception of state was a radical change.

#### Box 1.01

Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1712-1778) was born in Geneva. He spent a large part of his life in France but yet he always claimed a sense of belonging to his “fatherland” i.e. Geneva by using the title of “Citizen of Geneva” along with his name.

He lost his mother at a very young age. She died shortly after his birth. He received his education from his father, Issac Rousseau. Issac Rousseau was an able watchmaker but was an odd and temperamental man. He inculcated in his son at an early age the habit of reading.

At the age of 13, Rousseau by a chance of adventure left his native city for Turin where he became a Roman Catholic without being aware of what it entailed. He wrote at the end of his life that “I became a Catholic but I always remained a Christian”. In Turin Rousseau tried his luck to seek a new occupation from that of being an engraver. He got shelter and hospitality from one Mine de Warens in 1729 at Savoy. This was a decisive period in his life as a writer.

In his seminal work, **Social Contract** as in his other writings Rousseau reveals himself as obsessed with the demands of life in society, by the relationships of dependence and subordination which it creates among men. He was concerned about the rivalries and enmities which such dependence generates. Society which brings people together, in fact sets them apart and makes them enemies of each other. It is in these senses that he wrote the famous words by which he is well known till this day that “man is born free, but found in chains everywhere”.

Rousseau led a very turbulent life during that period of France when the intellectuals of France and other European countries were questioning each and every idea and conception of society. He wrote extensively and for a time was also known as a musician. His death came suddenly on July 2, 1778 in Ermenonville. He was a forerunner of the social sciences and perhaps even a founder. Emile Durkheim said that "Rousseau demonstrated a long time ago that if all that comes to man from society were peeled off, there would remain nothing but a creature reduced to sense experience and more or less undifferentiated from the animal".

Rousseau believed that to rise above this animal level human beings must relinquish the state of nature (Derathe, Robert 1968 : pp. 563-570. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13 & 14, Macmillan and Free Press).

It was the concept of *patrie* that Rousseau had in his mind when he wrote his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**. He is one of the philosophers whose ideas inspired many of the French revolutionaries including Robespierre. Rousseau has glorified people and what he calls "the general will" in this work. It is in this work that we first find the mention of the concept of civil religion.

According to Rousseau, the religious need lies in everyone. He believed that all the existing religions, especially Christianity, were inadequate in the ideal state. Therefore, he proposed a systematic civil religion "of which the sovereign would fix the articles". In other words, the political head would determine the articles of this religion and these articles are, as mentioned by Rousseau "social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject" (Nisbet, 1968 : 524).

Rousseau took the concept of civil religion very seriously since he even proposed sanctions against those who defaulted. These sanctions included banishment, that is, throwing the defaulters out of the community, and even death. These defaulters would be those who first accepted and then flouted the articles of belief which constitute the civil religion.

During the French Revolution, when it was at its height, from about 1793-1794 a civil religion was instituted. It was led by Robespierre and officially known as the religion of the Supreme Being. This religion worshipped the Revolution itself which was an event that had seized the minds of millions in the West. It has the political state, specifically the revolutionary state as the essence of belief and rite (Nisbet, 1968 : 524).

### Activity 1

You have just read the section on the Concept of Civil Religion, nature and development of Civil Religion. From your own experience write a note of about two pages on civil religion in our own society.

Compare your note with those of other students at your study centre.

During the 19th Century the phrase or the idea of Civil Religion seems to have disappeared from the political discourse. However, the spirit or religion of nationalism continued to thrive according to C.J.H. Hayes. He believed that the most impressive fact of the present age, i.e. the nineteenth-twenties was the universality of the religious aspects of nationalism.

Hayes points out that there exists a parallel between the traditional Christianity and the new national or civil religion which emerged during this time. The "God" of this

civil religion is said to be the national state which itself had emerged in Europe primary due to the Napoleonic Wars. It was during this war that Napoleon spread the message of the nationalist slogan of the French Revolution to all the parts of Europe.

According to Robert Nisbet (1968) the flame of nationalist feelings found during the 19th Century Europe and United States carried with it an enthusiasm of a religious kind which differentiates this civil religion from the civil religions of the ancient and the medieval societies. He gives the example of Hegel, a German philosopher who declared the national state i.e. Prussia to which he belonged as "the march of God on earth". This personal opinion of Hegel may or may not have been accepted by the nationalists of Europe and America but the majority of nationalists came to perceive their respective nations as being touched by divine.



**Traditional dance in Republic Day parade**

This rise of nationalism combined with militarism and racialism, to a certain extent, became the reason for several mass upheavals or reactions taking place during this time. This kind of phenomena has been observed in human history only during the religious wars of the 16th and the 17th centuries in Europe. Nisbet says that most probably World War I represented the culmination of the nationalist religious fervour in Europe.

This religious fervour for one's nation and what it stood for came under question after the Second World War when rise of Nazi nationalism and the Jewish holocaust brought an image of fear and revulsion in people's mind against excessive patriotism.

Today we find that patriotism of the kind found during the World War I and along with it civil religion had declined throughout the democratic world. However, we can still observe some form of religious-like sentiment associated with one's regard for the nation.

In the next section, we are going to discuss the varieties of civil religions found in different societies, with special emphasis on the American society.

i) Define the concept of civil religion in about 8 lines.

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ii) Describe Rousseau’s ideas on Civil Religion in about 10 lines..

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iii) What is the religion of the Supreme Being? Describe using about 8 lines..

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## 9.4 VARIETIES OF CIVIL RELIGION

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Scholars of sociology of religion such as, R.N. Bellah and Peter Hammond (1980) have found the existence of some kind of common faith in different societies particularly in Japan, Mexico and Italy. These societies had different structures in which this common faith was reflected. Bellah and Hammond also discovered in their cross-cultural comparison that none of these societies possess the full structure of civil religion as found in America. Let us examine some of these varieties of civil religion found in some of the societies during different periods of time.

### 9.4.1. Civil Religion in the Ancient Greek and Roman Cities

During the history of human societies, the explicit forms of gods of archaic religion had emerged due to certain circumstances and religious understandings. Bellah pointed out that various forms of social organisation are necessary for the emergence of a certain type of religious organisation on the form that it takes.

In this same context Swanson, a scholar who studied religion during the cross

cultural comparison, showed that in statistical terms the presence of a pantheon of gods as characterised by the archaic religions is closely linked with the presence of a number of groups of specialists within the society (Swanson, G.D. 1960 : pp. 82-96). He discovered that there is a pattern of development of superior gods within territorial consolidation and social and occupational differential of society.

According to Swanson, and another scholar Murray, this pattern originates from the family which is the ultimate sovereign group. It is in the family that the first religious practice is directed towards the worship of ancestral spirits or family gods or deities who protect the interests of that particular family or clan. The particular interest of the family is the particular interest of that family's god. This interlinkage becomes more and more differentiated as the societies become increasingly complex. In this evolutionary perspective of religion, the god of one family become associated with a particular occupational speciality.

With the emergence of larger social groups, scholars feel that some local gods may have merged with others to form the single god of the same occupational speciality or particular season. But this emerging itself depended on a clear idea of the final entity so that the process of merging stopped at some stage. Where a clear conception did not exist, the archaic religion did not reach its final phase of religious development.

However, in places where this final merger of local gods could not take place there the social and political differentiation in that society made it more natural for religious expression to take the form of a pantheon of gods. This is where we find the case of civil religion of the ancient Greece and Rome (Hargrove, B. 1989 : 109-112).

Religious practices were held in the family first, then in the city government in both the Greek City-States, as well as, Roman City-States. Each and every family of citizens who belonged to these city-states had their own sacred fires and appropriate rituals to propitiate their gods, for maintaining, using, honouring and renewing this sacred fire. But this ritual activity was conferred to only the Patrician families who claimed full citizenship. The class of Plebians and strangers were left outside the body politic because they in essence did not belong to, that is, had no part in this civil religion.

The plebians shared the religious ceremonies only if they came under the protection of a patrician family in a client relationship, with the patrician family being the patrons. According to Bellah, the most characteristic feature of archaic religions was the presence of the strong two-class system as found amongst the Greek and later the Roman city-states. The religion of the two classes also were not the same.

The upper classes believed that they had higher religious expression. In the Greek mythology we find a dual system of gods. There are the gods who have obviously developed from the primitive ritual divinities such as the mother earth, corn goddess of agricultural people and the lower classes, on the one hand, and on the other there are in the pantheon the Olympian gods of classical Greece imposed over the gods of the lower classes. The nature of these Olympian gods indicate the source of the conquerors who formed the upper class of the Greek society. They were the Aryans who invaded ancient Greece from the north.

Thus, civil religion in the ancient Greek and later Roman society, as reflected in their respective mythologies, reveals the importance given to the state and citizens of that state.

## 9.4.2 Civil Religion in France

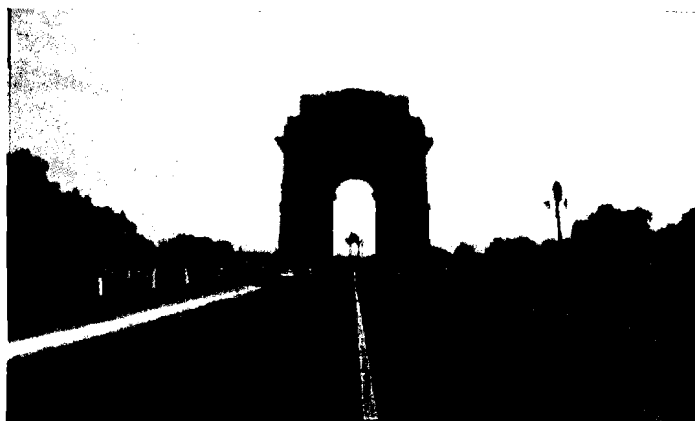
France during the 18th Century witnessed an age of not only socio-economic and political upheaval but also of religious skepticism and theological doubt. This period can be adjudged as the most crucial period in human history as it transformed the European society from a largely feudal to a democratic one.

It was this period of the French Revolution when intellectuals such as Voltaire and other “enlightened” literateurs came down heavily on “supernatural” religion and ecclesiastical institutions. They criticised and mocked Christian tradition as well as the Christian Bible.

Being influenced by the natural sciences, “reason” and scientific approach came to be held as a measure of judgement. In this mental framework, miracles, superstitions, traditional ways of thinking and believing all came to be questioned. Christianity was denounced as superstitious and its clergy as humbugs (You will get a clearer picture of this phase of French history and society if you go through the Unit 1, Block 1 of ESO-03 : Sociological Thought).

For the first time in the Christian history a large number of influential adherents to Christianity had come out openly in the criticism of the truth and the worth of its most fundamental tenets. As Hayes (1926 : pp. 93-125) pointed out, many of the 18th Century intellectuals perceived in the Trinity (i.e. the holy alliance of God, the Father; the son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost and in the Christian sacraments) only the vain imagining of dupes or hypocrites. They saw nothing in Christian Revelation or in any “supernaturalism” to which human beings could justifiably attach any sense of devotion or reverence.

The intellectuals of the 18th century Europe, especially France were logical in their arguments. They refused to follow Christianity. But yet, according to Hayes, these self same intellectuals did possess a religious sense which they have shown in many strong ways. They came to believe in a God of Nature who as he says “stated things which could not stop and who was so intent upon watching numberless worlds go round in, their appointed orbits and so transferred by the operation of all the eternal immutable. Laws which he had invented that he had no time or ear for the little entreaties of puny men upon a pygmy Earth” (Hayes C.G.H. : 1926 : 92-125).



Monuments such as India Gate in Delhi are respects of in icons in civil religion.



**Box 9.01**

Prof. Albert Einstein on religion :

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery—even if mixed with fear that engendered religion. A knowledge of this existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds—it is the knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity; in this sense, and in this alone, **I am a deeply religious man** (Ref. Ideas and Options) (Points to Ponder, Reader's Digest, Oct. 1991 : p.127).

Hayes says that this God of Nature was very much inferior to the God of Christians but he was outside of man and these 18th Century intellectuals managed to develop a mysterious feeling about him.

The God of Nature was not the only power that these intellectuals felt a religious devotion about. Some of them also discovered and paid obeisance to a mysterious force outside of themselves called Science. Later it was found that when capitalised this Science proved to be but a theological hand maid to the God of Nature.

There was another “hydra headed monstrosity” which these intellectuals worshipped i.e. the Humanity. These intellectuals were especially devout people. This devotion could be because when the whole of Humanity is deified it will be having a far greater mystery and awe attached to it, than the conception of a single God, Man or even the Trinity.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the father of sociology too during the latter half of this academic career propagated a religion of the Supreme Being i.e. the religion of the Humanity amongst the intellectuals of France during the 18th century.

With the waning of faith in Christianity during this time and increasing devotion to Nature, Science, Reason, Progress, Humanity and so on, the intellectuals of this period were giving expression to their inherent sense of religion. During this very phase there was another sort of worship i.e. the worship of the Political State.

The French Revolution was a landmark in the development of nationalism as a religion. As you have already seen, the intellectuals of this period brought about a sea change in the ideas and perspectives of people regarding society, economy, polity and so on.

In the beginning these intellectuals tried to syncretise the 18th Century philosophy with Catholic Christianity in a state church so that it would become democratic in organisation and can be conducted in the national interests. A philosopher of this period Abbe Raynal said, “The state, it seems to me is not made for religion, but religion is made for the state. The state has supremacy in everything. When the state has pronounced, the church has nothing more to say” (Hayes 1926 : 101).

The twists and turns that the history and polity of France took during the revolutionary period too, reveals the nature of the development of the civil religion. It aimed to create a national clergy, under the control of the civil power, with the same standing as other state-officials. This move was however, resisted by the traditional clergy of France which had till then enjoyed very high status, and power.

The civil Constitution was condemned at Rome in April, 1791 and since then this issue was squarely combined in France between the religions of Catholicism and Nationalism. Christianity was not formally rejected but only the clergy who swore allegiance to the Civil Constitution were allowed to perform Christian services. According to Hayes, the Catholic churches in most parts of France were transformed into civic temples. By 1793 the persecution of the clergy who resisted the change began because in the minds of the French Revolutionaries the Catholic clergy as a whole had committed the greatest infamy of all of defying the national state.

Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolutionaries. These Revolutionaries believed that a miraculous regeneration would take place in France in the "new order" and this regeneration would extend to the whole human race. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was hailed as "the national catechism", and a sincere belief in this Declaration was prescribed by the Constitution of 1791, drawn in France.

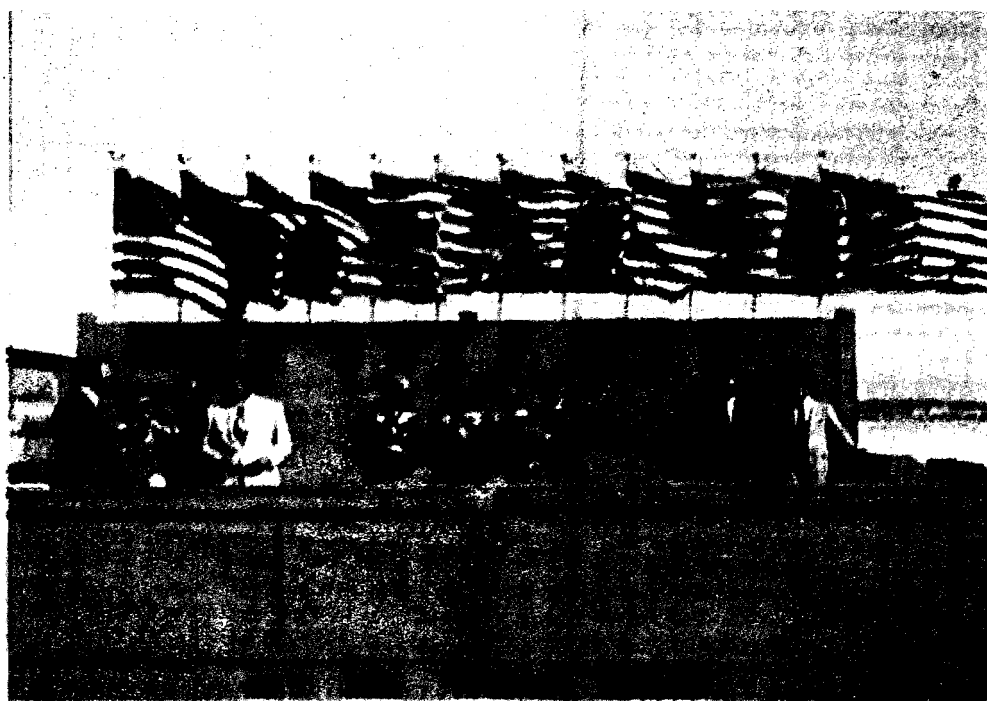
Those who refused to swear by this Constitution and what it stood for were cut off from the community by civil excommunication. The written Constitution embodying the Declaration, became holy writ.

Hayes writes that the religion of nationalism in France, and other countries of Europe, during this period, had lodged deep in popular consciousness. It emerged eventually in many strange forms opposed to the older philosophies and world religions as the most dominant religion of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

### 9.4.3 Civil Religion in America

Civil religion in its most crystallised and evolved forms is found in the American Society. The American society represents, in the most dramatic way the *religion of nationalism in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

The religion of nationalism led to the rise of a political clarity in every country in



The flag of a nation has a complex ritual along with other symbols of national amnity.

Europe which was devoted to the nation in the same way as the clergy i.e. the clergy was devoted to the church during the medieval period. Children were now born into, and received their primary identities from the national state, as they had once been born primarily into the church. Birth, marriage and death all became a concern of the civil state. In the areas such as, family, school, and charity i.e. social welfare measures, the civil government began to take charge instead of the church.

In America the great events like the birth-days of great political figures like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln came to be celebrated as solemnly as the feasts of the Christian saints and martyrs were once celebrated. Likewise, the great events of historical significance for the nation were also given a religious regard. The fourth of July, just like our Fifteenth of August, took on some of the same religious kind of significance as the Feast of the Nativity did in Christianity (Nisbet, 1968 : 526).

R.N. Bellah (1967 : 1-20) in his article on "Civil Religion in America" writes that "Christianity is the national faith, and others that the church and synagogue celebrate only the generalised religion of "the American Way of Life", few have realised that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well institutionalised civil religion in America".

Nisbet maintains that the American Civil religion had its widely recognised theology. One complete with creed, catechism and dogma. In America, as in many other nations too, a complex ritual surrounds the American flag and other symbols of national civil unity.

He says that during this period Protestants generally scorned the Catholics use of external adornments of faith such as, statues or idols of God, mural, portrait and so on. But yet they saw no harm in the use of these decorations where the worship of their nation was concerned. He says that in America it would be a rare public square which did not have at least one statue of some departed political saint. This is true of all European countries of that time.

We can find a resemblance to this in our own country. After Independence, the statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and others who sacrificed their lives for India's freedom stand testimony to the great historical event of the struggle for freedom of our nation.

Bellah has examined the way in which Americans treat religion on public occasions in community life. He has analysed the inaugural speech of American Presidents to show the great significance of civil religion in America. He pointed out that words and acts of the founding fathers of America, especially the first few presidents, shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has existed ever since then. Much of this religion is selectively derived from Christianity but yet it is itself clearly not Christianity. Presidents like George Washington, Adams or Jefferson have never ever mentioned Christ in their inaugural address and nor have any of the subsequent presidents. But it is very significant that none of these presidents have ever failed to mention God in their speeches.

According to Bellah, the God of civil religion is not only rather "unitarian" but is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law and right of people than to the question of salvation and love (Bellah 1967 : 1-20).

Bellah examined Kennedy's inaugural address of 20th January 1961 and found the Kennedy mentioned the name of God in two or three places. Similar references to God is also found in the speeches of other Presidents of America.

Bellah says that the reference to the term God reveals the essentially irrelevant role

of religion in a secular society like America. The reference of God in this speech as well as in public generally indicates that religion has “only a ceremonial significance” : it gets only a sentimental nod which serves largely to placate the more unenlightened members of the community before matters of great socio-political concern are discussed by the President.

Bellah says that a cynical observer of these proceedings might even say that an American president has to mention God in his speech otherwise he will risk losing votes. An appearance of religiosity is a kind of unwritten qualification for the office of the American President.

Kennedy’s speech and his references to God, which reveals the essentially vestigial place of religion in America, raises some important questions regarding the issue of how civil religion relates to the political society on the one hand and the private religious organisation on the other. Kennedy, in his speech mentioned God only in a general sense. He did not use the name of Christ although he himself was a Catholic Christian.

Bellah says that Kennedy did this because the specific reference to the Christian religion or any other for that matter, is the business of the Presidents’ own personal life. It does not in any way concern the conduct of his public office. Thus the principle of separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of religious belief and association but at the same time it also clearly segregates the religious sphere, which is essentially private, from the political one, which is public.

However, the reference to God in the President’s speech is justified in the sense that the separation of church and state does not rule out the religious dimension from the political spheres. Despite the specific elements of religious belief of every citizen, the Americans in general have certain common elements of religious orientation which they all share. These common elements play a crucial role in the development of American institutions and provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere.

Bellah says that this public religious dimension found in American society is expressed through a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals which as a whole constitutes the American Civil Religion. It is in this context that the inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event which reaffirms the religious legitimation of the highest political authority of the President.

Kennedy, in his speech said, “I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebearers prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago”. Here the oath mentioned is the oath of office, including the acceptance of the obligation to uphold the Constitution. This speech shows that beyond the Constitution, the President’s obligation extends not only to the people but to God.

Therefore, Bellah maintains that in American political theory, sovereignty rests with the people but along with that, implicitly and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. Thus it shows that the will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged. It is accepted that the will of the people may possibly be wrong. The President’s obligation, therefore, extends to this higher criterion i.e. God.

According to Bellah, the whole presidential address reveals the theme or meaning which lies deep in the American tradition. This theme is that of the obligation, both collective and individual to carry out God’s will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of the founders of America and it still continues till today in every generation.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Give in brief the salient aspects of civil religion in the Greek and Roman city-states. Use about 10 lines.

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ii) Why did the intellectuals of the French Revolution period reject the traditional beliefs and ideas? Were they non-religious? Answer in about 8 lines.

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iii) Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolution. Explain in about 8 lines.

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iv) The public religious dimension found in American polity and society can be distinguished from the private religious dimension. Discuss using about 10 lines.

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## 9.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have explained the various dimensions of civil religion. Civil religion has been defined as “the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political state”. You learnt that this concept was associated with a semi-religious fervour or regard in which political events and birth days or martyr days of great personages are celebrated.

Civil religion is not a new phenomenon but was found as far back as the ancient Greece and Roman Societies. In Civil religion we find a fusion of the political and the religious elements. This could be seen clearly in Japanese history till the World War II.

During the French Revolution the notion of “patrie” emerged. It was coined by the French philosophers and refers to the new conception of the political state. For them the state was one which was paternal in its regard for its citizens. You learnt about Jean J. Rousseau who for the first time used the term “civil religion” which forms a chapter of his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**.

Finally, in this unit you have learnt about the nature and development of the concept of civil religion in human history briefly. We described to you the varieties of civil religion found in :

- i) ancient Greek and Roman City-states,
- ii) French Society during and after the French Revolution; and
- iii) American Society.

As such you are now in a position to understand and explain the concept and reality of Civil Religion.

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## 9.6 KEY WORDS

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**Civic** : It is related with being a citizen.

**Clergy** : All persons, such as priests who are in holy order associated with church.

**Defaulters** : One who goes against the accepted rules.

**Holocaust** : The large scale killing of Jews during the World War II by the Nazis.

**Human Movement** : Due to certain socio-political or economic or ecological reasons when a large number of people move from one geographical area to another.

**Hydra** : an organism which has many tentacles or branches.

**Patriotism** : The devotion or love that one has for one's country.

**Regeneration** : The regermination or emergence of new social institutions, body of norms, values and beliefs after a period of decline and decay in a society.

**Social Contract** : An understanding reached by mankind to accept the norms and values of each other for congenial social existence.

**Trinity** : The holy alliance of God, the Father, Jesus Christ, the son; and the Holy Ghost. It is part of the Christian belief and theology.

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## 9.7 FURTHER READINGS

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Hargrove, Barbara, 1989. *The Sociology of Religion : Classical and Temporary Approaches*, Arlington Heights. Illinois.

Nisbet, Robert, 1968. "Civil Religion" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 pp. 524-527, Macmillan and Free Press.

Wuthnow, Robert, 1988, *The Restructuring of American Religion Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton University Press.

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## 9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Civil religion has been defined as that feeling of quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions which are found recurrently in the political history of a nation. This regard has a religious or semi-religious nature and is expressed through special festivals, rituals, creeds and dogmas which bestow honour to great political leaders or historical events of great significance to the nation.
- ii) Rousseau, a French philosopher was the first one to use the concept of civil religion in his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**. He used this term as the title of one of the chapters in this book. He was influenced by the notion of "patrie", i.e. the new conception of the political state which implies a paternal or fatherly regard of its citizens by the political state as developed by the French philosophers. Rousseau took the concept of civil religion as fulfilling the need of human beings for the religious. He believed that traditional christianity did not fulfill this need adequately. Therefore, civil religion in which the political head would determine the components of this religion was an answer. This components would be the social sentiments without which a human being cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject.
- iii) The religion of the Supreme Being worshipped the French Revolution itself. As indicated, the civil religion emerged during the French Revolution when it was at its height (1793-1794). It was initiated by Robespierre, one of the French Revolutionaries and came to be known officially as the religion of the Supreme Being. It believed in the political state, specifically the revolutionary state as the main focus of and element of its belief and rites.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) In the Greek, and later Roman city-states the religious practices were conducted in the family first and then in the city government or the city-states. Each family of citizens of these city-states had their own sacred fires and gods and goddesses to propitiate. Family unit was responsible for performing the rituals for maintaining, honouring, using and renewing this sacred fire. However, as only the class of patricians i.e. those who were the lords and masters of the land were considered the rightful citizens of the city-state, only they had the right to participate in this civil religion. The class of plebians or the serfs were not considered citizens and as such could not participate in the ritual activity of propitiating their family Gods.

Sometimes they shared the religious ceremonies of their master but only as their clients.

- ii) The intellectuals of the French Revolution rejected the traditional beliefs and ideas as during the Enlightenment Period each and every idea came to be questioned. Nothing was accepted on its face value or because it was God given. Not only socio-economic and political ideas were critically evaluated but the religious ideas of traditional christianity also came to be questioned. However, as Hayes (1926) says this did not mean that these intellectuals were without religious feelings. For they developed a religion like regard for such concepts as “reason”, “progress”, “humanity”, “the Supreme Being” and so on.
- iii) Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolution because it was during this revolution that the worship of the political state emerged by the Revolutionaries. The Revolution itself came to be worshipped and the new Constitution and its symbols became part of this civil religion. A national clergy emerged under the powers of the civil state with the same status as that of the state officials.
- iv) The public religious dimension found that in the American polity and society can be distinguished from the private religious dimension. The first one is general and regards the nation and citizenship as the main goal of worship or religious rites and ceremonies while the second one is the private affair of each person as it is specific to their being members of a specific religion.