Speaking of Diversity
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America.

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Pluralism, Democracy, and Catholicism: Religious Tensions

One aspect of wartime experience that has been largely forgotten, both in the popular mind and by historians, is the effect the war had on religion and religious groups in American society. Yet the crisis of war restored religious ideas to intellectual respectability, enhanced the prestige of “neo-orthodox” thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, and stimulated such rapid growth in church membership that people spoke in the postwar years of a popular “revival of religion.” A different dimension of religious change saw Protestant cultural hegemony challenged by the breakthrough of Catholics and Jews to new levels of public visibility and influence. So noticeable was the combined effect of these changes that social scientists began to treat religion as a marker of group boundaries almost as important as race.

While the essays in part 3 touch on several aspects of the postwar religious scene, they do not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of the topic. This chapter explores religious tensions in the postwar years, specifically the controversies that broke out between Catholics on the one hand and Protestants and secular liberals on the other. It could just as well have been included under the heading “Religion and American Diversity,” but I have placed it in part 2 because of the central role played in the controversies by the war-related ideological themes of authoritarianism, democracy, and pluralism.

My attention was first drawn to the “Catholic question” as a complication of pluralism when I was working on the essay published here as chapter 3, and the reader will see that Horace M. Kallen, the father of cultural pluralism, figures prominently in this chapter too. It was first presented at the 1985 meeting of the Southern Historical Association in Houston, Texas and published a year and a half later in the Review of Politics.

After World War II bitter controversy broke out in the United States between Catholics, on the one hand, and Protestants and liberals on
the other. Although important issues were involved, these controversies have attracted almost no scholarly attention. Donald Crosby's book on Catholics and McCarthyism is the only full-scale monograph dealing with any aspect of the controversies of which I am aware. My intention here is to draw attention to two additional aspects of the controversy which touch on matters that are still of interest and in need of much more study by historians. These are: 1) ambiguities in the concept of pluralism; and 2) a tendency that emerged in the critique of Catholic authoritarianism to treat democracy as a civil religion. But before taking up these issues we must look briefly at the development of "the Catholic issue" between the Al Smith campaign of 1928 and the end of World War II.

The 1928 election was, of course, the high point of anti-Catholic sentiment in the twentieth century. The extreme to which no-popery was carried aroused considerable sympathy for Catholics, however, and the next few years were marked by improved interreligious feeling. The Depression, which crowded cultural issues off center stage, was basic to this development, but as an important element in the Democratic coalition, Catholics also benefited from Franklin D. Roosevelt's election. As president, Roosevelt appointed more Catholics to office than anyone ever had before. Catholics may also have benefited in a more diffuse way from the concern for improved intergroup relations that emerged in the context of New Deal liberalism.

After 1935 this mellowing was sharply offset by a series of developments that poisoned relations with liberals and Protestants. Concentrating first on the liberals (though recognizing that many Protestants were included in this group), we note that Father Charles E. Coughlin's shift to an anti-New Deal position in 1935-36 alerted liberals to the Fascistic tendencies of his activities. Thereafter his growing extremism on the menace of Communism, his open anti-Semitism after 1938, and the sometimes violent behavior of his Christian Front followers contributed to the linkage between Catholicism and Fascism which many American liberals took for granted by the end of the decade. In New York City, where much liberal opinion was formed, Catholic anti-Semitism (and Christian Front hooliganism) reflected not just the influence of Coughlin but also Irish Catholic frustration over losses sustained in the 1930s to the growing political, economic, and cultural power of the city's Jewish community.

Most decisive in reawakening hostility to the Catholic church, however, was the Spanish Civil War. Public opinion favored the Loyalists by a wide margin, and to liberals the war was a clear-cut contest between
Fascism and democracy in which the Catholic church had shown its true colors by rallying to the Fascists. American Catholic opinion was almost as strongly pro-Franco; according to Catholic commentators, the real issue was Communism, which they believed dominated the Republican side and which they held primarily responsible for the Loyalists' campaign of persecution against the church in Spain. The ideological conflict could hardly have been more direct. What was even more alarming to the liberals, however, was that the Catholic church seemed to be dictating American foreign policy by mobilizing the political influence of Catholic voters.

The episode that solidified this impression was Catholic opposition to lifting the embargo on arms sales to the Spanish Republicans. Although scholars are divided on whether Catholic influence was in fact decisive in keeping the embargo in force, liberals were convinced that it was, and it made them furious. To Harold Ickes, caving in to Catholic pressure was “the mangiest, scabbiest cat” that could possibly be let out of the bag, and he freely predicted that it would generate an anti-Catholic backlash. Even the semireclusive literary scholar Van Wyck Brooks was deeply upset by the specter of “Political Catholicism.” He had lost sleep over it, he confided to Lewis Mumford. “For the Catholic Church is growing so bold in this country. It defeats every measure for decent living.” Yet how could one combat it without arousing the furies of ignorant no-popery?

The liberal case against the Catholic church was summed up in 1939 in George Seldes’s Catholic Crisis, a book that one reviewer thought (incorrectly) might “become the novissimum testamentum of the rapidly growing American anti-Catholic reaction.” To Seldes the Catholic church was clearly in league with Fascism. Support for Franco was the centerpiece, but Vatican softness toward Germany and Italy, and opposition to liberalism and Communism, buttressed his case. The domestic scene Seldes covered with a farrago of evidence ranging from Father Coughlin and anti-Semitism to Catholic ties with corrupt politicians (especially Boss Hague) and objectionable pressure group tactics brought to bear on Congress, state legislatures, the press, the film industry, and private groups or individuals who espoused causes of which Catholics disapproved, such as birth control.

Seldes’s indictment was comprehensive in its way, but it failed to bring out the point that the clash between Catholics and liberals was at bottom one of radically divergent worldviews. For Catholics, the great evil of the day was secularism—the exclusion of God from human life, personal and social—and against that evil they launched a vigorous cam-
paign in the 1930s and 1940s. Essential to the campaign was a philosophical critique of the intellectual position underlying secularism; in carrying out that critique, Catholics became involved in harsh polemics with the thinkers they called "naturalists," the most prominent of whom was John Dewey. As pacesetters for American liberalism, thinkers such as Dewey already had ample reason for annoyance at Catholics; the assault on their ideas and the degree to which religious ideas seemed to be regaining intellectual respectability aroused them to something like outrage.

The deepest source of bitterness was that Catholics and naturalists each accused the other of holding principles that furnished the intellectual foundation for totalitarianism. Underlying the mutual recrimination was a disagreement about how values are grounded. Catholics and other "absolutists," as they came to be known, held that there is an inherent structure of value in reality; that man can discern its basic pattern, and that he is obligated to take it as his guide in the social and political realm as well as in personal and family life. The naturalists, or "relativists," on the other hand, denied that reality exhibited any such inherent structure of value; they affirmed instead that man evolves his own values from social experience and imposes them on reality.

The relativist position dominated American intellectual life in the 1930s, but those who held it were profoundly discomfited by the charge that their own principles left them no grounds on which to object to Hitler because all he was doing was imposing on reality a set of values different from their own, but which they had no warrant for saying was evil. Moreover, the charge continued, by denying that values rested on anything more than human volition, the relativists had actually paved the intellectual way for Hitlerism. Unable to refute the charge as formulated, the relativists simply dismissed it and brought a *tu quoque* countercharge against the absolutists. According to their etiology, totalitarianism in politics derived from authoritarianism in thought; that in turn was inseparable from the conviction that one could attain the truth about things in their very essence; hence Catholics and other absolutists were the real intellectual progenitors of totalitarianism.

This interpretation complemented the widely accepted linkage between Catholicism and Fascism, and it was the majority view of American intellectuals. But the Catholic-absolutist critique had put secular intellectuals on the defensive for a time, and it would have required supernatural patience (to which, of course, they made no pretension) for them not to have felt anger as well as chagrin. By the time the war ended,
they were thoroughly aroused on the subject of Catholic authoritarianism and prepared to respond vigorously to any further provocation.\(^\text{14}\)

Protestants too had had as much as they could take of Catholic “aggressiveness.” Many of them were alienated in the late 1930s for reasons already mentioned. Yet the campaign for interreligious brotherhood being promoted by the National Conference of Christians and Jews provided a countercurrent of good will. In these circumstances, President Roosevelt’s 1939 appointment of Myron C. Taylor as his “personal representative” to the Vatican constituted a significant turning point in the overall climate of Protestant feeling. Because it raised the church-state issue in highly visible form, and even more because it seemed to symbolize a new status for Catholics in the national community, the Taylor appointment aroused strong Protestant opposition from groups relatively untouched by the anti-Catholic feeling generated by issues such as the Spanish Civil War.\(^\text{15}\)

The church-state issue was sharpened in 1940 by the appearance of a book restating the traditional teaching on the desirability of Catholicism’s being the established religion of the state. Separation of church and state and religious freedom were, according to this teaching, merely expedients tolerable in situations where the Catholic faith could not, for practical reasons, be established as the religion of the state. This formulation was all the more shocking because its author was John A. Ryan, the outstanding American Catholic liberal of his generation. Naturally, no non-Catholic reader was satisfied with Ryan’s bland reassurance that the possibility of establishing the Catholic religion in the United States was so remote that no sensible person need feel any concern about it. Indeed, the Ryan book seemed to give the lie to the protestations by American Catholic leaders that they were sincerely committed to the American principle of religious freedom and church-state separation.\(^\text{16}\)

The growing strength and assertiveness of American Catholics took on a more disquieting cast in the light of this revelation of what Protestants regarded as the ultimate intentions harbored by the Catholic church. Something else that heightened their anxieties was the conviction that the hierarchy was pursuing a carefully thought out plan to “take over” America and subvert the democratic ideals and values that were rooted in its Protestant heritage. The degree to which this conviction had established itself by the end of the war in the minds of the leaders of mainstream Protestantism—not just the radical fringe of traditional Catholic baiters—is made clear by an eight-part series by Harold E. Fey entitled “Can Catholicism Win America,” which appeared in the
Christian Century between 29 November 1944 and 17 January 1945.17

Fey was an editor of the magazine; he was clearly not a bigot in the old-fashioned sense, and he conceded that any religious group had a right to try to build up its following. "But," he added, "when the extension of a religious faith becomes an avowed means of gaining political and social power looking toward clerical domination of American culture, objections are in order." The Catholic hierarchy, in Fey's view, was making a calculated grab for power that was "conceived in totalitarian terms."18 Other Protestant writers also warned against "emergent clericalism" and pointed to abuses it had produced in other lands—"the crucifixion of liberty, political fascism, social decadence, revolutionary violence, and anti-clerical revolt."19 The lesson for Protestants who cared about their religion and the national culture that had sprung from it was obvious: they had to arouse themselves to the danger and develop a militance of their own in behalf of the "culture of liberty."20

The stage was thus set for a major eruption over "the Catholic issue" when the war ended. There was nothing like the groundswell of popular no-popery that existed in the 1920s, but both Protestant and secular liberal elites felt that Catholic presumptuousness had gone too far.21 Catholics, for their part, had so completely internalized the conviction they were underdogs in American society that they seemed unaware others regarded them as aggressors.22 Indeed, their very heedlessness, springing from what was called "insulation from the main stream of American life and thought," was urged as a complaint against them.23

But Catholics might have responded that it was time for "the mainstream" to be redefined. Had they not proved their devotion to American ideals by wartime service and sacrifice? Had not the war itself discredited liberal optimism and vindicated Catholic teaching on the reality of sin and man's need for divine assistance? Was not their longstanding opposition to Communism in the process of being vindicated by postwar disillusionment and the emerging Cold War? Of course Catholics were conscious of differing from others on many issues, but they considered their position correct and thought they were equally entitled with others to try to influence the direction of national policy. From the Catholic viewpoint, this was a matter not of being presumptuous or aggressive but of asserting the legitimate claims of a large group of Americans who were no longer willing to be told by others how they should behave.

The clash was not long in coming.24 Traditional sore points such as U.S.-Vatican relations, restrictions placed on Protestant missionaries in Latin America, and Roman ties with conservative regimes in Europe
continued as significant irritants. But the quarrel over public aid for parochial schools soon emerged as the paramount issue, especially when it became interwoven with postwar attempts to provide federal aid to education, and when the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Everson case (1947) sanctioned the use of public funds to bus parochial school children, while at the same time setting forth a very stringent definition of the “wall of separation” between church and state. The decision galvanized into action the newly formed organization Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, which pursued a militantly anti-Catholic line. Later decisions of the court in the McCollum (1948) and Zorach (1952) cases steered a somewhat zigzag course with respect to religion and education and kept the school question in the forefront of controversy.  

Although secular liberals operated from different premises, they agreed with Protestants on the school question. Paul Blanshard’s American Freedom and Catholic Power (1949) set forth the liberal case against Catholicism in comprehensive terms. The school issue was very prominent, but Blanshard also scored Catholic censorship, the crude use of political clout to impose a repressive morality on others, support for reactionary political regimes, disregard for civil liberties, and, most basically, the church’s adherence to a hierarchical principle of organization that made it intrinsically un-American. When portions of the book appeared as a series of articles in the Nation, they set off a bitter quarrel in New York; the appearance of the book itself called forth an angry flood of Catholic responses. Blanshard elaborated his charge in 1951 with a second book drawing out the parallels between Catholicism and Communism as two opposed totalitarian systems.  

Catholics’ anti-Communism, already a matter of great concern to liberals, took on an even more sinister cast in 1950 when it became intertwined with McCarthyism. The junior senator from Wisconsin was, of course, a Catholic, and he had much Catholic support. But Catholicism itself was not the central issue in McCarthyism, and Catholics were divided in their reactions to McCarthy. Although suspicions lingered after McCarthy’s downfall, “the Catholic issue” had receded from prominence by that time. The appearance in 1955 of Will Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew, which presented a sympathetic picture of Catholicism as one of the “three great faiths of democracy,” can be taken as an indication that the period of controversy was over.  

With this rough sketch of the background, and without attempting to treat the subject comprehensively, we turn now to the ambiguities of
pluralism. Although Horace M. Kallen introduced the key term *cultural pluralism* in the twenties, it did not catch on until the end of the next decade and came into general use only in the wartime years and after. By that time it meant something quite different from what Kallen originally had in mind. Written in reaction to the hundred-percent Americanism of World War I, his original version of cultural pluralism was radically antiassimilationist. It envisaged American nationality not as a distinctive something-in-itself but as a collocation of autonomous ethnic nationalities, each of which had its own spiritual enclave, all somehow coexisting harmoniously within the political entity called the United States. When the term was taken up by the students of intergroup relations in the late thirties, however, cultural pluralism had lost its hard edge and become an enlightened form of Americanization theory. Although it laid verbal stress on diversity, its proponents acknowledged that it was “essentially a technique of social adjustment which will make possible the preservation of the best of all cultures” as contributors to the generic American culture. It was, in other words, a relaxed version of the classic melting pot ideal, which was precisely what Kallen meant to discredit and overthrow.84

The assimilationist version of cultural pluralism came into wider usage in the war years because it was ideally suited to the rhetorical requirements of the situation—that is, it allowed the insistence on wartime unity to be couched in the language of tolerance and respect for diversity. We were, after all, fighting a brutal totalitarian regime based on an abhorrent doctrine of racial supremacy. What united us in this desperate struggle was our common commitment to a set of ideals, the ideals of democracy—indeed, of Western civilization—among which respect for the dignity of the individual, whatever his background, loomed very large. Sharing this common ground, our differences were unimportant. Of course, we had to live up to our ideals; hence the message of tolerance for diversity, respect for cultural pluralism, took on a certain urgency. But at bottom it assumed we were more alike than different because we were “Americans All.” As Louis Adamic put the matter in 1940: by respecting diversity, “we will produce unity—automatically—and make it dynamic, bring[ing] out the basic sameness of people.”85

As this term that seemed to say one thing and mean another became ever more bland and innocuous, students of government complicated matters even more by applying the word *pluralism* to America’s multi-group political system. Although it came out of a different intellectual tradition, this usage blended with *pluralism* as it was understood by
commentators on intergroup relations, making the term more diffuse and generalized than ever.¹¹

Catholics were conventionally included among the minorities to be cherished in our pluralistic society, and reducing religious prejudice was a time-honored goal of those committed to better intergroup relations. Catholics found the idea of pluralism congenial and were using the term freely by around 1950. By that date social scientists were also calling attention to the tendency for ethnic distinctiveness to fade into a broader social differentiation based on religion. This interpretation, fully elaborated in Herberg's triple-melting-pot thesis of 1955, suggested that cultural pluralism was resolving itself into religious pluralism, or at least that religion and race were the most basic elements in American pluralism.³²

That, of course, was how Catholics saw the matter. Being defined as a religious minority, they regarded respect for religious differences as the foundation stone of American pluralism, which they interpreted to mean that a religious minority was warranted in pursuing its own way of life so long as it did not thereby infringe on the rights of others. Hence they were shocked when Protestants and liberals denounced as "divisive" activities that Catholics believed were wholly legitimate expressions of American pluralism.

Although occasionally referred to in the twenties and thirties, divisiveness emerged as a leading issue only in the postwar era of religious controversy when it was closely associated with the school question.³³ Not only were Catholic efforts to get public funds for their schools denounced as divisive; so also was the very existence of parochial schools, even if maintained by Catholics themselves on a fully voluntary basis. Nor could the charge always be dismissed as the work of Catholic-baiters such as Paul Blanshard. It was also made by the prestigious president of Harvard University, James B. Conant. While disclaiming any thought of weakening America's prized diversity, he nevertheless characterized parochial schools as a threat to national unity. Indeed, Conant sounded like an old-fashioned advocate of the melting pot in praising the role played by the public school in assimilating immigrants.³³

Divisiveness was not, however, confined to the schools. Protestant observers had long warned that the hierarchy was mobilizing the Catholic faithful into religiously segregated associations as part of their campaign to take over American society. The tremendous array of institutions and societies Catholics had built up, along with the heavy stress laid on what was called "Catholic Action," lent plausibility to such fears.³⁵ By 1951
the danger seemed so pressing that the *Christian Century* was moved to the extreme of repudiating pluralism itself. An editorial entitled “Pluralism—National Menace” made the warning explicit, linking it with an exposé of Catholic mobilization in the city of Buffalo which was described in an accompanying article. In the face of this kind of pluralism, the editors felt no embarrassment in calling universal public education “the *sine qua non* of a homogeneous society,” and in urging “straightforward, uncompromising resistance to any efforts by any group to subvert the traditional American way of life.”

Rejection of pluralism itself was highly anomalous, and quite unnecessary in view of the availability of *divisiveness* as a pejorative term. That is no doubt the reason the *Christian Century’s* repudiation of pluralism had no impact on general usage. But it does call attention to the puzzling relationship of pluralism and divisiveness. Why was the former overwhelmingly acclaimed while the latter was universally deplored? Was it possible to be pluralized without being somehow divided? What made one kind of diversity good and another kind bad? For enlightenment of this perplexity we turn to Horace Kallen, the inventor of “cultural pluralism.

Kallen’s *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea* (1956) was his first major treatment of the subject in thirty years, and his ideas had changed dramatically. Pluralism was no longer primarily associated with ethnic cultures and their preservation; the vision of a federation of nationalities had vanished. Rather, cultural pluralism had been extended to include the most “diverse utterance of diversities—regional, local, religious, ethnic, esthetic, industrial, sporting, and political.” But Kallen was not prepared to embrace *every* kind of pluralism: absolutist or isolationist pluralism, a pluralism of noninteracting social monads, he rejected with something like indignation.

Kallen’s style is diffuse, and it is difficult at times to make out exactly what he is saying, but his criteria of acceptability seemed to derive from what he referred to as “the philosophy of Cultural Pluralism.” This philosophy envisioned reality as a perpetual flux; an unending cosmic coming and going; nothing absolute or fixed. Since this was the nature of reality in itself, pluralism—understood as recognition of this state of affairs and a willingness to accommodate to it through openness and flexibility—was obviously the appropriate social policy. A correct understanding of cultural pluralism, in other words, implied acceptance of a specific metaphysical position, although Kallen would probably have objected to calling it that, since it was, from his viewpoint, simply the way things are.
Correctly understood, pluralism was synonymous with Americanism. That was the point of Kallen's title—*Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*—and of the long passages given over a Whitmanesque roll call of the prophets, symbols, doctrines, and documents that comprised "the Bible of America." As this language suggests, Kallen tended to erect Americanism into a civil religion; indeed, he conceded the point in responding to a Roman Catholic critic who objected to his treating Americanism as "an ultimate ideology ... a surrogate religion." Of course the "American Idea" was not a surrogate religion. "It is," Kallen declared, "that apprehension of human nature and human relations, which every sort and condition of Protestant, Catholic, Judaist, Moslem, Buddhist, and every other communion must agree upon, be converted to and convinced of, if they mean to live freely and peacefully together as equals, none penalizing the other for his otherness and all insuring each the equal protection of the law. And this," he concluded roundly, "is how the American Idea is, literally, religion."

Given this confession of faith, one begins to see why Catholics and secular liberals were at loggerheads on pluralism and divisiveness. Kallen, who spoke with authority in this area, affirmed that pluralism and Americanism were the same thing and that it (or they) required everyone to accept the same substantive "apprehension of human nature and human relations." Catholics believed almost precisely the opposite. Far from requiring this kind of agreement, American pluralism, in their view, designated a system that allowed people to live together in civic peace despite their disagreements on basic beliefs about human nature and human relations.

The terminology in which discussions of pluralism were carried on made it almost impossible to discern this fundamental difference of view. The differences emerge more clearly in another article of Kallen's entitled "Democracy's True Religion," discussion of which brings us to the second major issue I want to touch on—the tendency to treat democracy as a civil religion which emerged in the critique of Catholic authoritarianism.

The role played by World War II in stimulating the development of democracy as a civil religion can hardly be overestimated. The need to mobilize the nation’s spiritual resources in the desperate struggle against totalitarianism naturally brought about a terrific emphasis on democracy as the symbol of the values for which we fought. As a result, wartime nationalism assumed a highly ideological form, expressing itself in fervent reaffirmations of traditional democratic ideals, the four freedoms, and what Gunnar Myrdal called in 1944 “the American creed.”
of Myrdal in this context calls to mind another aspect of the situation, already alluded to in passing, namely the point that emphasis on the universalistic values of democracy as the basis of wartime unity was what made possible the seemingly paradoxical celebration of pluralism. It was, to repeat, only because the nation was united on the ideology of democracy that it was committed to tolerating diversity—and could afford to do so.15

All this was, in my opinion, not only understandable in the circumstances but also necessary and proper. I do not, in other words, regard what has just been said as an unmasking of something cynical or manipulative.14 On the contrary, I cannot conceive of anything more appropriate for emphasis at the time than the traditions of democracy. But of course there were drawbacks as well. Like all developments, the emphasis on democracy was subject to its own distinctive excesses, labored under built-in difficulties, and carried negative potentialities.

The most obvious negative potentiality was realized in the semi-hysteria over subversion that developed in the Cold War years. Although deplorable, this kind of fixation on the danger of “un-American” tendencies was but the obverse side of wartime insistence on the democratic ideology as the touchstone of national unity.

The built-in difficulty that democracy is a highly abstract concept that means different things to different people tended to aggravate the impassioned confusion of the postwar years. Misunderstanding springing from this source led easily to suspicion of bad faith, for it is difficult not to question the honesty of an antagonist who claims to be devoted to a principle cherished by all, but who interprets it as justifying policies one believes to be perverse. While it was inherent in the situation, this difficulty was perhaps made worse by the tendency of secular liberals to think of democracy in “cultural” terms, that is, as a mode of behavior or “way of life,” rather than as a set of institutional arrangements or the principles that those institutions were intended to embody.16

The cultural definition of democracy appealed to the liberals because it enabled them to get around the claim of the absolutists that the good society had to be based on common assent to universally binding general principles. But it inevitably implied a behavioral test of true democracy. After all, if democracy is a way of life, only those who live that way are really democrats. To the extent that they accepted a cultural definition of democracy, liberals were thus inadvertently erecting behavioral conformity into the test of authentic Americanism.

The built-in difficulties and negative potentialities already mentioned were reinforced by what I consider the distinctive excess of the wartime
emphasis on democracy—namely, the tendency to invest democracy with the aura of the sacred, to exalt it to the level of a civil religion. Given democracy's close association with the deepest values of Western civilization, this kind of tendency was natural enough at a time when those values were threatened with annihilation. More often than not, it was merely an implicit tendency—illustrated, for example, in the crisis-induced association of American values and the "Judeo-Christian tradition"—but it was occasionally formulated in more explicit terms. The article by Kallen referred to above is one of these explicit formulations, and it also illustrates how liberals sometimes insisted on conformity to their understanding of "the democratic way of life" as the test of true Americanism.

Kallen's article, which was popular in approach, appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in July 1951. Defining religion in Deweyesque terms as that which a person invests with ultimate importance and "bets his life on," Kallen proceeded immediately to the assertion that science and democracy were a religion in this sense. They were one religion because science was democracy in the realm of ideas, while democracy was "the method of science" applied to human relations. This religion was also called "secularism," a designation that Kallen accepted despite the hackles it raised in some quarters.

The distinctive feature of this religion, according to Kallen, was that its "what" was a "how," by which he meant that its content was a process or method rather than a body of teachings. That method he described as "a free mobility, wherein majorities may become minorities without any loss of rights and minorities [may become] majorities without any accrual of privilege; where every majority guarantees all minorities equal liberty and equal justice and protects them from the dangers of coercion and injustice at its own hands." Attuned as it was to the cosmic flux of reality, this religion assured an "open society in which the entire miscellany of mankind may enter freely and move and have their beings in safety, all equally free to unite themselves with their fellows or to abandon one union and join another as their consciences direct, their needs prompt, and their understandings guide."

This religion—which was Kallen's midcentury version of pluralism seen from a different angle—might appear terribly vague, but it was not without practical implications. For true believers like Kallen, "the democratic faith" was "the religion of and for religions"—in other words, it was superior to all other religions and had the responsibility of seeing to it that they obeyed its principles. No "assumption of infallibility" on the part of a subordinate faith could be tolerated, for example, nor could any
other practice "repugnant to the religious life" as that was defined by the religion of science and democracy. And since "free mobility" was the crucial "what/how" of the democratic faith, it was unacceptable for any subordinate religion to impede the free coming and going of its followers by attempting to keep them apart from other religionists.  

From what has already been said, one might infer that the Roman Catholic church would have trouble adjusting itself to the regime of science-democracy-secularism as the religion of religions. Another area of incompatibility emerged from Kallen's discussion of ministry. Since it did not accept any "invidious distinction between the 'religious' and the other vocations of man," the democratic faith affirmed "the priesthood of all believers" and thereby consummated the liberation of the human conscience begun by the Protestant Reformation. Directly opposed to this democratic understanding of religious ministry was "clericalism," by which Kallen understood the pretension of a sacerdotal caste to special powers that were used to justify special privileges.

By this point in the article it was clear that Catholicism was incompatible with the religion of science and democracy. Kallen did not shrink from the duty this laid upon him of pointing out that fact, and of exploring its implications. Indeed, he devoted at least one-fifth of his space to the peril to democracy posed by "the Roman Catholic hierarchy," which had become so "notably aggressive" in resisting the salutary processes of secularization that all non-Catholics were justifiably alarmed. He covered familiar ground in saying that the church had "declared war" on church-state separation, denounced the U.S. Supreme Court, and demanded an ambassador to the Vatican. He was more original, however, in relating these offenses to a perverted interpretation of the American principle of freedom of religion.

According to the "sacerdotal argument" advanced by the Roman hierarchy, Kallen explained, freedom of religion was identified with "the liberty of a priestly craft [sic], calling themselves 'the teaching church,' to impose its authority willy-nilly." But that was, of course, wrong; freedom of religion was not intended to allow churches to conduct themselves in keeping with their own law, "such as the canon law." What freedom of religion really involved, Kallen declared as the exegete of the democratic faith, was "recognition by the state . . . of the liberty of the personal conscience . . . of the individual's right of private judgment which secures him from the aggressions and coercions of sacerdotal authority." In other words, it was the job of the state to make sure all the subordinate religions conducted themselves "democratically" in their dealings with their own
communicants. And if they didn’t, the state would presumably require them to do so.\textsuperscript{54}

As an illustration of this extraordinary interpretation of freedom of religion and separation of church and state, Kallen pointed to the area of education. Consider the case, he said, of “an American parent believing in the Roman Catholic religion.” Such persons had as much right as anyone else to send their children to the public school; but according to the law of the Catholic church, they could do so only under pain of sin. This amounted, in Kallen’s view, to “suppression of the parent’s right by clerical coercion,” and it constituted “a violation of the Constitution.”\textsuperscript{54} He failed to specify what should be done, but since it was unconstitutional and wrong, judicial and/or legislative relief would seem to be called for—court orders or laws spelling out what the Catholic church could and could not do in maintaining its own internal discipline. Theoretically, the church might be required to do away with the hierarchy as such, since that authoritarian structure was clearly the root of the offense against the religion of science, democracy, and secularism.

Even without drawing that inference, Kallen’s article confirmed precisely the point Catholics were always urging against their secular-liberal critics—namely, that the secular-liberal position amounted to a religion in itself and one that claimed the privileged status of being normative for American society. Kallen’s affirmation of his own sectarian version of democracy as a civil religion was not a momentary aberration; he repeated it in 1954 and 1965.\textsuperscript{55} Nor was he the only one to make such an affirmation in that era. J. Paul Williams, a professor of religion at Mount Holyoke, did the same, laying particular emphasis on the role of the public school in inculcating “the democratic ideal as religion [sic].” Williams spoke of the public school as “a veritable temple for the indoctrination of democracy” and prescribed as “worship” school exercises aimed at revitalizing democratic idealism. Will Herberg asserted in 1952 that “influential Jewish religious leaders” had been advocating essentially the same thing “for years.”\textsuperscript{56}

This kind of talk was an embarrassment to public school spokespersons who endorsed strict separationism and insisted that secular education was in no way identifiable with religious or “metaphysical” instruction.\textsuperscript{57} In 1954, however, the prominent historian of American religion Sidney E. Mead chided the public for ignoring Williams’s argument. Mead, who was to emerge in the 1960s as a leading apologist for American civil religion, all but explicitly endorsed Williams’s dictum that “governmental agencies must teach the democratic ideal as reli-
This, he frankly admitted, "is essentially an appeal for a State Church in the United States, and ... [the] arguments for it largely parallel those traditionally used to defend Establishments."58

What Mead failed to explain was how such an establishment could get around the First Amendment, which proscribed establishments of religion without making an exception for the religion of democracy. Writers sympathetic to American civil religion do not address this problem very straightforwardly—at least not in the terms presented here. Perhaps the reason is that, for a writer such as Kallen, the word democracy stood for the ultimate principles underlying human life, and the idea that the Constitution could really proscribe its being "established" as the common faith of Americans was simply incoherent. But this, of course, is merely to assume that the religion of democracy cannot be proscribed because it is true, while it is entirely proper for false religions to be proscribed—especially (Kallen at least would add) religions as antipathetic to "democracy" as Roman Catholicism was.

It was because of this tendency to absolutize democracy, to elevate it to religious status, that Catholics, who were themselves abused as authoritarians, responded in like terms, calling their secularist critics "totalitarians" who insisted that everyone else think and act as they did.59 While often shrill in defending themselves, Catholics were on solid ground in rejecting Kallen's "democratic faith" as the normative formulation of Americanism. At the same time, reasonable Catholics were deeply concerned to mitigate the controversies and to correct the genuine abuses their critics pointed out. Most of all, Catholics were embarrassed by commitment to an outmoded ideal of church-state union. Hence it is no accident that a revitalized American Catholic liberalism was forged in the era of controversy, the most significant achievement of which was John Courtney Murray's working out of a persuasive Catholic rationale for religious freedom and separation of church and state.60

But that is another story. The point of this one is that analysis of the controversies of the forties helps us to identify basic conceptual ambiguities that have persisted in more recent discussions of pluralism and democracy, religion and secular humanism.

NOTES


17. After running in the magazine, the series was widely circulated as a pamphlet. A Congregational minister in Madison, Wisconsin, recommended it to his flock in the following terms: “Here is a carefully wrought study of the strategy by which Rome, weakened in Europe, hopes to make America a Catholic province, capturing Middle-town, controlling the press, winning the Negro, courting the workers, invading rural America, and centralizing its power in Washington.” Quoted in advertisement for the Fey pamphlet in *Christian Century*, 62 (February 28, 1945), 287.


19. J. A. M. (John A. MacKay), “Emergent Clericalism,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 5 (February 19, 1945), 1–2. MacKay, later described by his fellow Presbyterian John Foster Dulles as “violently anti-Catholic” (Crosby, *God, Church, and Flag*, 136), issued the following warning in 1943: “No small part of the contemporary crisis is the imperiousness of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The evidence of studied disregard for the sensibilities of non-Roman Christians in the United States is so great that, if a very serious situation is to be avoided, it will be necessary for the leaders of Roman Catholicism in this country to moderate their attitudes and alter their procedures. It is well that they should know that Protestant sentiment, more thoroughly united today
on important issues than it has been for generations, will not tolerate indefinitely the arrogance of the new Catholic policy.” MacKay, “Hierarchs, Missionaries, and Latin America,” Christianity and Crisis, 3 (May 3, 1943), 2.

20. In a discussion of the “Protestant Reorientation” that led eventually to the formation of the National Council of Churches, the Christian Century, 60 (October 27, 1943), 1222, cited the growing power of the Catholic church as requiring a Protestant response and added, “Only by imagining American culture as predominantly informed by one or the other of these faiths will the significance of their differences appear. Protestantism cannot be true to itself and be indifferent to the character which American civilization would take on if that Catholicism became the preponderant spiritual force in the nation’s life.” In a paper entitled “Protestantism and Democracy,” originally presented in 1945, the well-known historian of American religion William Warren Sweet asserted that the basic freedoms enjoyed by Americans “are to a large degree Protestant accomplishments. And if they are to be retained, they must be preserved by a united and intelligent Protestantism.” Sweet, American Culture and Religion (Dallas, Tex., 1951), 39. See also Charles Clayton Morrison, Can Protestantism Win America? (New York, 1948), esp. chaps. 1, 6 (this book, expanded from a series of articles in the Christian Century, was inspired by Fey’s series in the same journal); James Hastings Nichols, Democracy and the Churches (Philadelphia, 1951), esp. 243–79; and Ronald James Boggs, “Culture of Liberty: History of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 1947–1973” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1978), esp. 1:63–68, which outlines the “culture of liberty” ideology as it was drawn up in 1947 by Charles Clayton Morrison.


22. The Catholic tendency to interpret all criticism from non-Catholics as bigotry is reflected in the way the Jesuit weekly, America, reacted to Fey’s series: it dismissed the articles in a brief note that characterized them as giving the “green light to Ku Kluxism.” America, 72 (February 17, 1945), 382. The same article quoted Time, January 26, 1945 on how Protestants were launching “a slam-bang crusade against the Roman Catholic Church.”

23. The degree to which this view was widely shared among intellectuals is suggested by the fact that Lynn T. White, Jr., considered it relevant to a wartime discussion of the future of the humanities. See White, “Conflicting Forces in the United States,” in The Humanities Look Ahead: Report of the First Annual Conference Held by the Stanford School of Humanities (Stanford, Calif., 1943), 38.


27. Crosby, God, Church, and Flag, esp. chap. 6.


30. See chaps. 3, 6, above. Quotation from Louis Adamic, “This Crisis Is an Opportunity,” Common Ground, 1 (Autumn 1940), 66; see also Adamic, From Many Lands (New York, 1940), 298–99. Note also the following statement, the context of which links it closely to Kallen and cultural pluralism: “We perceive that the very diversity which is the creative principle in American life is made possible by a unifying faith in the dignity and value of the individual, a unifying aspiration toward equality of opportunity and freedom for all.” Foreword to issue devoted to “Intercultural Education,” English Journal, 35 (June 1946), 286.

31. See chap. 3.

32. For examples of Catholic usage of the term, see Bryan M. O’Reilly, “Catholic America Comes of Age,” Catholic World, 166 (January 1948), 347; Charles Donahue, “Freedom and Education: The Pluralist Background,” Thought, 27 (Winter 1952), 542–60. The modulation of ethnic into religious identity is implied in Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, “Single or Triple Melting Pot?” American Journal of Sociology, 49 (January 1944), 331–39; is explicitly identified as a trend in Alfred McClung Lee, “Sociological Insights into American Culture and Personality,” Journal of Social Issues, 7, no. 4 (1951), 10–14; and is made the basis of Herberg’s interpretation of the religious situation of the 1960s in Protestant-Catholic-Jew, esp. chaps. 2–3.

33. Donahue begins his article by saying, “‘Divisive’ has come to be a favorite word among those who believe that all American education...should be tax-supported, secular, and entirely under public control.” Donahue, “Freedom and Education,” 542. Efforts to arouse “divisive passions” were deprecated in 1920 in what has been called “the first united expression of opposition to religious and racial prejudice in the history of the United States.” See James E. Pitt, Adventures in Brotherhood (New York, 1955), 12–13. See also J. Paul Williams, The New Education and Religion (New York, 1945), 13; T. T. Brumbaugh, “How Religion Divides Us,” Christian Century, 62 (January 31, 1945), 139–39.


35. This theme runs through the Fey series cited earlier. See also James T. Farrell, “The Pope Needs America,” Nation, 143 (October 17, 24, 1936), 440–41, 476–77;


38. Ibid., esp. 51–52.

39. Ibid., 86ff.

40. Ibid., 206–7.

41. The paradigmatic formulation of the Catholic understanding is that of John Courtney Murray, S. J.: "The American Proposition makes a particular claim upon the reflective attention of the Catholic insofar as it contains a doctrine and a project in the matter of the 'pluralist society,' as we seem to have agreed to call it. The term might have many meanings. By pluralism here I mean the coexistence within one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions—those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man within a universe that stands under the reign of God. Pluralism therefore implies disagreement and dissension within the community. But it also implies a community within which there must be agreement and consensus. There is no small political problem here. If society is to be at all a rational process, some set of principles must motivate the general participation of all religious groups, despite their dissen­sions, in the oneness of the community. On the other hand, these common principles must not hinder the maintenance by each group of its own different identity." Murray, We Hold These Truths (New York, 1960), x, 15–24.


43. See above, chaps. 3 and 7. For Myrdal and the "American Creed," see his American Dilemma (New York, 1944), 1:3, 25.

44. In this I differ from the editors of American Quarterly, 36 (1984), 341, who said of my contribution that its implications might be "devastating" for students of American culture.


46. See Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," American Quarterly, 36 (Spring 1984), 65–85, esp. 66–69. F. Ernest Johnson commented on the spiritualization of democracy in "Democracy and Discipline," Christianity and Crisis, 3 (December 13, 1943), 1–2. Herbert Agar et al., The City of Man, A Declaration of World Democracy (New York, 1941) is explicit in proposing a "universal religion of Democracy"; see esp. 80–85. For a Catholic critique, see Willfrid Parsons, "Even to Contempt of God," Commonweal, 33 (January 24, 1941), 352–54. Lewis Mumford, who was a signer of the "City of Man" statement, quoted an English correspondent
on how democracy seemed, in the crisis of war, to be evolving toward a new kind of
religion. See Lewis Mumford to Van Wyck Brooks, September 14, 1940, in Spiller,
47. Kallen, “Democracy’s True Religion.”
48. Ibid., 6–7, 29.
49. Ibid. 7.
50. Ibid., 7, 29.
51. Ibid., 29–30.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 30.
54. Ibid.
55. Kallen, Secularism Is the Will of God (New York, 1954); Kallen, “Secularism as the
Common Religion of a Free Society,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,
4 (1965), 145–51.
56. J. Paul Williams. What Americans Believe and How They Worship (New York,
1952), 371; Williams, “The Schoolmen and Religion,” School and Society, 70 (August
earlier statements by Williams along the same line, see his “Religious Education,
Ignored but Basic to National Well-Being,” School and Society, 57 (May 22, 1943),
598–600; and his New Education and Religion. For Herberg’s assertion, see his “Sec-
tarian Conflict over Church and State,” Commentary, 14 (November 1952), 459.
57. See V. T. Thayer, Public Education and Its Critics (New York, 1954), 65–
69. 142–44, 149–60.
Religion in Life, 23 (Autumn 1954), 566–79; as reprinted in Mead, The Lively
Experiment: The Shaping of a Christianity in America (New York, 1963), 55–71, esp.
68–71. Lawrence H. Fuchs seems to take a similar position concerning the desirability
of American civil religion; see his John F. Kennedy at the pages cited under the index
heading “Americanism, culture-religion of.”
59. In 1953 a prominent liberal-Catholic journalist, William P. Clancy, drew an
explicit parallel between Catholic authoritarianism and doctrinaire secularism and
described them both as “the fruit of that totalitarian spirit which hating diversity,
demands that all existence be made over to conform to its own vision.” See Clancy,
“Catholicism in America,” in Catholicism in America. A Series of Articles from the
Commonweal (New York, 1954), 11–12.
60. For an early appreciation by a Protestant observer of the importance of Mur-
ray’s work, see George H. Williams’s contribution to Williams, Beach, and Niebuhr,
“Issues between Catholics and Protestants,” esp. 176–86.