Chapter 1

Introduction: Civil Religion and Nationalism on a Godly–Civil Continuum

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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGION

Scholars have been trying to understand the social expression of religion at least since the nineteenth century (Spilka et al., 2003: 3-23). The scholarly discussion about religion reflects a divide between those who maintain substantive definitions of religion and those who hold functional views. Substantive definitions relate to the content of the religious phenomenon, referring mainly to the sacred (belief, doctrine, devotion, rituals, agents), whereas functional definitions point to the utility or the effect that religion has (community, immortality). (Fursech, Repstad, 2006: 16-20; Droogers, 2009: 263-269).

Several definitions from scholarly literature have been considered for the purpose of operationalizing the term of religion in this study. One definition was Max Muller’s proposal that religion is:

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Introduction

[…] a mental faculty which […] in spite of sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the infinite under different names and under varying disguises (Muller, [1880] 1930: 21).

Keith Yandell proposed that religion is:

[…] a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived […] and sets rituals, institutions, and practices (Yandell, 1999: 16).

Talcott Parsons and Anthony Wallace described the prototype of religion as having certain qualities, seven that are essential: (1) A belief in the existence of a divine entity, supernatural and metaphysical, that rules the world; (2) A solid doctrine that constructs the framing of reality and forms the moral codes according to which everything in life can be explained; (3) Total devotion, expressed often by personal willingness for self-sacrifice; (4) Public rituals and ceremonies; (5) A cohesive community; (6) Immortality; (7) Social agents and institutions that continually maintain religion and ensure that all the other attributes do not erode (Parsons, 1979: 62-65; Wallace, 1966: 52-101).

1. A Belief in the Existence of a Divine Entity

All religions are characterized first and foremost by a complex system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and a sense of dependence on a power that is beyond human command (Radcliff-Browne, 1956: 157). Religion is a universal feature of human culture in the sense that every society recognizes the existence of unsolved and awe-inspiring extraordinary manifestations of reality (Lowie, 1936: xvi). Thus, the practices and rituals that are typical for religion derive from a belief that a divine superpower, a supernatural being, controls the universe. The basic common denominator of all religions is the belief that there are spirits that inhabit an invisible world and people have a relationship with them (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Beit-Hallahmi, 1989; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). William James portrayed the essence of faith in a divine entity as an acceptance of the existence of some parallel cosmos:

[…] there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists (James, [1897] 1956: 51).
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