

Remaking the American Classroom: The Critical Race Theory Panic and Republican Civil Religion

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Abstract

American civil religion (ACR) is defined as a non-sectarian faith composed of symbols, narratives, and practices that build a quasi-religious sense of national identity. ACR has generally been framed as a unifying force, capable of transcending social divides to create a common identity for an incredibly diverse nation. This paper will argue that the Republican Party has rejected this concept, and constructed an alternative Republican Civil Religion. The rhetoric, narratives, and goals of the Republican Party surrounding their crusade against the terms “woke” and “Critical Race Theory (CRT)” demonstrate a repurposing of symbols of ACR to reduce cultural tolerance, create an exclusive definition of American, and redefine aspects of American history. This paper will examine Florida CS/HB7, a bill that severely restricts how race and racism are taught in Florida schools, and how it has been promoted, to demonstrate the principles of this new Republican Civil Religion.

The existence of an American civil religion was first proposed by sociologist Robert Bellah in his 1967 essay *Civil Religion in America*. Bellah defines American civil religion as “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things” which work to define American identity and political speech. This civil religion is not an alternative to other forms of religious identity, but is rather nonsectarian in nature and accommodates those who subscribe to any religious tradition. American civil religion is influenced by elements of Christianity, but is not explicitly Christian. Bellah conceptualizes any references to Christianity not as a conscious effort to define American

identity as Christian, but as the historical side effect of the cultural role of Christianity in early American history. This explains why so many documents and practices within the American government, as well as speeches by American political leaders, evoke God without specifying which God (Bellah 1967). Bellah identifies that the construction of American history and identity has always taken on a religious dimension, identifying how Americans “saw themselves as being a ‘people’ in the classical and biblical sense of the word” (Bellah 1975, 2). American civil religion is an attempt to secularize the concept of a “people” with pursuits endorsed by a higher power to accommodate all faith traditions, while still harnessing all the mythic significance of the original biblical use of the term.

Catherine Albanese presents a framework of American civil religion with three parts: creed, code, and cultus. The creed is the belief that America is a chosen nation. This status can be seen as derived from God, nature, or any conception of greater forces influencing historical events, but the ultimate message remains the same. The creed frames America as a millennial nation, responsible for bringing about a “golden age of peace and prosperity”. The creed fosters a culture of designating “us” and “them”; if America is a chosen nation that makes its chosen people different from those in other nations. The code is an operationalized version of this creed. Being a part of the chosen people comes with the obligation to promote and spread the values that define their chosen status. The code is a mandate to “work for the collective good” of the nation. These obligations can range from small acts like voting in elections to major sacrifices like serving in the military. The cultus is a collection of sacred symbols that reinforce the mythology of the civil religion. This includes sacred locations like Independence Hall of Ellis Island, sacred rituals like celebrating July fourth or Thanksgiving, and national “saints” like the founding fathers or current and former Presidents. These symbols and rituals foster national pride and unify the chosen people. Together, these three elements of American civil religion produce an “exclusive community” that can “bind all Americans together” (Albanese 2013, 287-289).

Both Bellah and Albanese identify that American civil religion is dependent on common myths that work to build American identity. Bellah argues that the value of myth is its ability to “transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or society” (Bellah 1975, 3). Religious studies scholar Petra Peter Gardella elaborates on this point, outlining the value of emotions in American civil religion. Gardella argues that Americans have “learned to value liberty, democracy, peace, and tolerance through the monuments, texts, and images of American civil religion.” Americans experience an emotional response to these symbols that affirms national identity and the values of American civil religion. These responses are fundamentally irrational, but they are incredibly strong (Gardella 2013, 6). American civil religion presents symbols whose values are rooted in national mythology, these symbols and stories take on emotional resonance for Americans, and that resonance can then be harnessed to unite Americans behind a particular candidate or policy. The symbols of American civil religion are common in political speech because of this capacity. Invocation of the symbols and myths associated with American civil religion can be enough to sway the public, regardless of practical individual self-interest.

The purpose of American civil religion is to produce a unified American identity and community out of a pluralistic society. Gardella identifies that “Americans have no natural, common culture, but use a borrowed language and live on land recently taken from other nations”. American colonial and immigration history have produced a country with a lot of racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity whose people often lack common ground (Gardella 2013, 6). American civil religion is an attempt to create this common ground, by producing a collection of symbols, myths, and ideas that can render a unified national identity. Albanese describes that American civil religion has “functioned as an answer to the problem of manyness” by offering an overarching “one story” that welcomes all the subgroups that make up American society and produces a sense of common identity (Albanese 2013, 290). The practical applications of American civil religion are not without

challenges and limitations, but its fundamental framework is built on the principle of inclusivity. It is a symbolic vision of the American public as one people, chosen for a higher purpose, and in pursuit of the common good.

Making A Republican Civil Religion

The highest goal of American civil religion is to produce a unified American public and a sense of shared identity and purpose. However, for many it falls short of meeting this goal. Albanese explains that American civil religion can hold a deeper resonance for white Americans, who consistently see themselves represented in the historical symbols and mythology. In contrast, “Americans who are people of color and immigrants who are newer and more diverse find the civil religion’s ties with the past not especially meaningful” (Albanese 2013, 290). This does not represent a rejection of American identity. It represents an absence of emotional resonance with some of the symbols that have historically been associated with American civil religion. It makes sense that Black Americans may not feel the same positive emotional connection to the “political saints” of the past who perpetrated the institution of slavery. Black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans all see themselves underrepresented in the collection of “political saints” that define American civil religion. The Democratic voter base has consistently been more diverse than its Republican counterpart in recent elections. Black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans all made up a greater percentage of Democratic voters than Republican ones. In the 2020 presidential election 85% of voters who supported President Trump were white, compared to 61% of those who voted for President Biden (Igielnik 2021). The Democratic party has a greater percentage of people who Albanese identifies as less likely to resonate with the messages of American civil religion. In contrast, the Republican electorate is more white, and thus more likely to feel connected to these symbols, which has supported the development of a Republican civil religion.

Additionally, there are structural differences between the major

political parties that have supported the development of the Republican civil religion. These differences are described by Grossman and Hopkins through the theory of party asymmetry, which proposes that the two political parties are not simply identical institutions operating on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. Rather, there are structural and cultural differences between the parties that explain why their supporters behave differently from each other. Grossman and Hopkins propose that the Democratic party is best viewed as a big tent: representing an alliance of convenience between a range of groups who each have individual policy goals. Democrats are likely to be more motivated by identification with a demographic or interest group than by the concept of being a Democrat. To win elections, Democratic leaders need to propose policies that satisfy each individual group in order to hold the coalition together (Grossman and Hopkins 2015).

In contrast, the Republican party is held together by an ideological core. Being a Republican is the dominant identity that motivates their political participation. To win the support of the base it is more important for Republican politicians to engage with that language of party values and principles than it is for them to have specific policy goals. The power of this core ideology translates into a culture of internal policing of party leaders. Republican leaders who are viewed as insufficiently loyal to the core ideology can be labeled as not being “real” Republicans by the voters or other party leaders (Grossman and Hopkins 2015). This relationship with the core ideology closely parallels what religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln describes as a “discourse of truth”. According to Lincoln, all religious systems rely on fundamental sacred beliefs that are above questioning by followers. Lincoln explains that “religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred”, meaning that party ideologies can easily take on religious dimension when they are supported by followers who are willing to regard them as such (Lincoln 2003, 6). This reverence for an ideological core and culture of separating the true believers from those who are inadequately devoted fosters an

environment where a party-specific civil religion can emerge.

The origins of Republican civil religion can be traced back to the rise of the New Right in the mid 1970s. Political scientist Benjamin T. Lyncer describes the emergence and membership of the New Right as follows: “It serves to remember that many social arrangements in America - white supremacy, male supremacy, Protestant hegemony, and Victorian sexuality, to name just a few - faced progressive challenges in the twentieth century, and the right wing can be said to absorb all of their defenders” (Lyncer 2014, 25). These individuals were grappling with two competing ideologies: the value of limited government, and the desire for sweeping policies to bring about “moral reform”. Lyncer concludes that “Republican theology asserts the mutual dependence of individual liberty, moral virtue, and Christian faith to support a civil religion that values all three” (Lyncer 2014, 35). The centrality of Christianity represents a clear rejection of Bellah’s notion of American civil religion. While American civil religion may embrace some Christian symbols, it is fundamentally accepting of all faiths as equally welcome in the American story. American civil religion is tangentially, not explicitly, Christian. Republican civil religion asserts that America is a Christian nation, and presents conservative Christians as the only “real Americans”, and certainly the only “real Republicans”.

The theology that supports Republican civil religion is based on three fundamental beliefs. First, that natural rights like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are a gift from God. Second, that God grants these rights because people all contain the potential to attain Christian virtue. And third, that the purpose of having these rights and creating systems of government to implement and protect them is the advancement of the Christian faith (Lyncer 2014, 41). This connection between Christian virtue and natural rights produces a very narrow conception of what freedom is and who deserves it. While Republican civil religion is grounded in the principle of limited government, the purpose of that government is ultimately the advancement of Christian virtue. This justifies government interference when the

“moral culture” of the nation is at stake and the public needs to be protected from immoral vices that threaten American society (Lynerd 2014, 42). Keeping the people virtuous and pure is a priority that outranks keeping the government limited. This theology frames Republicans as the authority on what is or is not a threat to the nation's virtue, and frames restricting or violating the rights of those they deem unvirtuous as a righteous crusade endorsed by God.

The conception of the relationship between race and American identity in Republican civil religion is influenced by the ideology of white Christian nationalism. Sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry describe how “when some whites --many whites, in fact-- hear the words “Christian” and “American” they think of “people who look and think like us.”” (Gorski and Perry 2022, 14). This represents a rejection of the inclusive nature of American civil religion; real Americans have to be ‘people like us’. Gorski and Perry describe white Christian nationalism as a story of freedom, order, and violence. In this story, white Christian Americans are those considered worthy of God-given freedoms, they are called to use those freedoms to maintain an orderly and pure society, and they are justified in using any means necessary to protect that order from outsiders, even if it requires violence (Gorski and Perry 2022, 7). The January sixth insurrection represents the kind of violence white Christian nationalism can justify: if the election process was compromised then order must be restored, whatever it takes.

Republican civil religion fuses the underlying narrative of white Christian nationalism with a political party and partisan identity. By adding a party institution to the story, Republican civil religion creates an outlet for the crusade. A political party provides a path to political power; one that comes with a team of ‘people like us’ and significant financial resources. The call to righteous violence can be subverted into the quest for political power and the weaponization of laws and institutions to bring about the desired societal order. Republican civil religion represents the same underlying ideology of white Christian nationalism, but precariously contained by the moderating forces of

institutional procedure and norms of governance.

This paper will argue that the Republican civil religion utilizes the mythology and symbols of American civil religion, but abandons all of its intended unifying power. This produces three new interpretations of Albanese's creed, code, and cultus. The creed of Republican civil religion frames only Republicans as the "real Americans" and chosen people of God. The code of Republican civil religion abandons the concept of working for a common good in collaboration with all citizens and instead defines proper civic engagement as a righteous crusade against other Americans they perceive as a threat to virtues or status in society. The cultus of Republican civil religion harnesses the political saints and symbols of American civil religion, but mandates specific ways that those symbols can be viewed and discussed. While American civil religion has historical roots in Christianity but is not explicitly Christian, the Republican civil religion harnesses the story of white Christian nationalism to equate racial and religious identity with the status of 'real American'. The Republican civil religion is a rhetorical tool used to unite the party base in service of maintaining a social hierarchy that privileges its members and their values at the expense of other Americans.

Words As Symbols: Wokeness and Critical Race Theory Discourse

The primary definition of the term "woke" from the Merriam Webster Dictionary is "aware and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (Merriam Webster). This is the definition that reflects the origins of the term. In an article for their *Words We're Watching* series Merriam Webster identifies that the term originated from the dialect African American Vernacular English (AAVE). It's a slang form of the word "awake" that takes on a metaphorical connotation: those who are woke are awakened to the realities of structural racism in American institutions and culture. They are "self-aware, questioning the dominant paradigm

and striving for something better”. Those who are not woke are either unaware of or purposefully resistant to acknowledging the realities of enduring racism in American society. The term is commonly used in the phrase “Stay woke”, imploring those in and outside of the African American community to remain engaged with issues of social and racial justice. The term entered mainstream discourse in 2014, following the shooting of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri. It became more popular as the Black Lives Matter movement gained attention (Mirriam Webster 2017) It was language that belonged to the African American community, and to activists and allies for the cause of racial justice.

In his article *Race, Emotions, and Woke In Teaching*, Scholar Carl Grant reveals that the concept of wokeness is particularly valuable to students of color in the classroom. Grant argues that “being and remaining woke illuminates and promotes resistance to the lies, myths, and misrepresentations of whites as warriors and “real” Americans. It challenges the argument that people of color should be either subservient or invisible” (Grant 2019). Wokeness provides a tool for students of color to better engage with the world around them through an awareness of the bias that can be present in their surroundings.

There is, however, a secondary definition of the term. Mirriam Webster defines this second version as “politically liberal (as in matters of racial and social justice) especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme” (Mirriam Webster). Social scientist Daniel Miller analyzed the evolution of the term “woke” in a podcast series titled *It's In The Code*. Miller identifies that the public discourse has evolved to the point that the term woke now serves as an epithet meant to delegitimize racial justice advocates as a threat to the version of “American values” the Republican party promotes. The term is used in this way by Republicans for Republicans. The majority of conservative white people did not encounter the term woke until it had already been appropriated by the Republican party, so they never had to grapple meaningfully with the disconnect between its original definition and its

current use in conservative discourse (Miller 2023). Being woke represents a direct threat to the white Christian nationalist worldview, because it challenges notions of white supremacy that support it. Republican civil religion has been harnessed to create a pseudo-secularization of the concept, advancing the ideology of white Christian nationalism while packaging it in a way that doesn't alienate Republican voters who are uncomfortable with explicitly embracing that identity.

Ron DeSantis has repeatedly and proudly denounced the concept of wokeness. Following his election to a second term as governor of Florida, DeSantis said in his victory speech "We fight the woke in the legislature. We fight the woke in the schools. We fight the woke in the corporations. We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob. Florida is where woke goes to die" (Czachor 2022). That's a strange claim to make so openly given the original meaning of the term. It seems like it would not be politically advantageous for a governor to come out and say that they intend to mobilize their entire state in opposition to racial equality. However, DeSantis is working with the second definition of the term. For DeSantis, woke is just a shell that can be filled with whatever liberal ideology he disapproves of at a given moment. His electoral success indicates that a significant number of Florida voters share his interpretation of the term.

This same redefining effort is mirrored in the Republican discourse surrounding Critical Race Theory (CRT). It is more challenging to create a simple definition of CRT. It is not just one concept, but rather an evolving academic discipline encompassing a variety of scholars who interpret and apply the theory differently. The term CRT was originally coined by law professor Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw describes CRT as a way of understanding how racial inequalities continue to survive generations after the end of slavery and explicit legal segregation. It is a framework for critically examining where systemic racism has previously existed and continues to exist within American laws and institutions in order to provide solutions to the inequality these laws and institutions have produced (Ottesen 2022).

Crenshaw describes CRT as “more a verb than a noun”: it serves as a methodology for studying and addressing racial inequality in America. It also resists the notion of “colorblindness”: the idea that the solution to racism is to avoid acknowledging issues of race. While CRT originally centered on the experiences of African Americans, it has evolved to encompass similar scholarship on the effects of systemic racism on Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous Americans (Fortin 2021). CRT is not a manifesto of ideas, it is an academic theory that is interpreted and debated among scholars.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Crenshaw describes the linguistic conflict that occurred when the term CRT began to be utilized outside of the realm of academia and racial justice advocacy groups. Crenshaw identifies the shooting of George Floyd, and subsequent summer of protests, as the point at which CRT became present in mainstream discourse, stating “Every state in the union had a march. The majority of people out there were not of color. Language was being shared widely for the first time: "systemic racism," "institutionalized patterns of marginality," "racial power." People were saying these words in a way that they hadn't - ever!”. However, Crenshaw also describes a downside to having people with no background understanding of the terms utilizing them for the first time. She uses the metaphor of a popular song on the radio to explain the phenomenon: if someone has encountered the song enough times they can probably sing the chorus with confidence, but they might spend the verses humming along with no real sense of the words until the next chorus comes along (Ottesen 2022). People with the best intentions were using the right language without educating themselves or others about what those terms actually mean. This lack of public awareness made it possible for opponents to create alternative definitions for the terms to serve their own political agenda. Liberals were using terms they didn’t understand, conservatives were inventing new definitions and claiming they understood.

Christopher Rufo, a noted conservative activist, admits the true intentions behind conservative organizing against CRT in a Tweet,

saying “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans” (Rufo 2021). Rufo openly admits that Republicans are lying about the meaning of CRT. And yet, that thread still has supportive comments from his followers, the very people he admitted he was misleading. It is unlikely that those actively engaged in protesting CRT in schools are doing so based on a belief that college-level legal theory is on the agenda in their child’s kindergarten classroom. CRT is now a catch-all term for whatever the topic of day is in the conservative culture war, in the same way that Ron DeSantis uses the term woke. In the discourse of Republican civil religion the terms woke and CRT have evolved into a symbol that identifies their enemies.

Being opposed to wokeness, according to its original definition, is arguably classifiable as racist. But, opposing the version of wokeness that exists within the Republican discourse pushes inherent racism just far enough under the surface that followers of the Republican civil religion can claim that their opposition is based on other factors. In this way, it has poisoned discourse about race and racism in America. If the label of woke can potentially be leveled by Republicans against any politician who is advocating for racial justice in any capacity, and Republican voters will unquestioningly accept the woke label as meaning that politician is radical, then no politician with an interest in appearing moderate can talk about issues of race and racism in American society. As Miller says, the term woke belongs to Republicans now, it is hardly heard from centrists and liberals. Those who hold political and social power have the authority to dictate the “correct” methods minorities should use to advocate for equal treatment (Miller 2023). Law professor Derrick Bell, whose legal scholarship formed the early foundations of CRT, labels this problem “interest convergence.” The term identifies that “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites,” and that no solution for racial

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injustice will be provided that “threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites” (Bell 1980). Republican civil religion cannot accept terms like woke and CRT because they threaten the social order on which its ideology relies.

The Individual Freedom Act

In 2022 the Legislature of the State of Florida passed CS/HB 7. Officially, the bill is titled the Individual Freedom Act (IFA). However, it is more commonly referred to by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis as the “Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act” or, for short, the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act.” DeSantis proclaimed that Florida would be the state where woke went to die; this bill is an attempt to follow through on that promise. A press release from the Governor’s office claimed the bill would “take on both corporate wokeness and Critical Race Theory,” and “give businesses, individuals, children, and families tools to fight back against woke indoctrination” (Staff Press Release 2021). The bill places restrictions on how race and racism can be discussed in workplace training courses and instruction on American history in Florida schools. The bill imposes harsh penalties on workplaces and schools that fail to conform to the standards. The backlash to this bill has largely focused on its list of eight provisions restricting the teaching of race and racism in Florida schools. The eight provisions are as follows.

1. Members of one race, color, sex, or national origin are morally superior to members of another race, color, sex, or national origin.
2. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.
3. An individual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin.
4. Members of one race, color, sex, or national origin cannot and

should not attempt to treat others without respect to race, color, sex, or national origin.

5. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears responsibility for, or should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin.
6. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment to achieve diversity, equity, or inclusion.
7. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin.
8. Such virtues as merit, excellence, hard work, fairness, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness are racist or sexist, or were created by members of a particular race, color, sex, or national origin to oppress members of another race, color, sex, or national origin” (Individual Freedom Act of 2022).

Katheryn Russell-Brown, a professor at the University of Florida Levin College of Law, frames this law as “a contemporary iteration of the slave codes, Black laws, Black codes, and Jim Crow laws—all of which criminalized Blackness” and “controlled racial movement, racial etiquette, and racial order.” Russell-Brown presents this law as the most recent effort in a long line of anti-literacy laws weaponized by white people in power against Black people. This effort originates with laws prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read or write. It has evolved into anti-literacy laws that deprive Black students of the knowledge of their role in American history (Russel-Brown 2022). There are various provisions above that demonstrate the bill's intention to deny literacy of their history to Black students. The third provision

denies that race, sex, and ethnicity define who is oppressed or privileged, denying the existence of white privilege and the systemic oppression of Black people. The fourth and eighth provisions both frame colorblindness as the only acceptable approach to dealing with race in the classroom. But how is a teacher expected to discuss topics like slavery or the civil rights movement without acknowledging that both resulted from the oppression of Black people and the privileging of white people on the basis exclusively of their race?

The seventh provision of this bill focuses on the emotional responses of students to content about race and racism in the classroom. The bill states that students should not have to feel “guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress” in the classroom as a result of content related to race and racism. The question this language begs is: whose emotions does this law value? Grant identifies that Black students have constantly been forced to deal with negative emotions in the classroom setting. Grant states that Black students “have come to school with enthusiasm and confidence, only to have their motivation undercut by the negative emotion they encounter with the absence of their history and contribution to society, and being perceived and treated as a problem” (Grant 2019). This bill claims to prioritize student emotions, while at the same time banning the content that would make Black students feel valued and accepted. It becomes clear that the bill is prioritizing the feelings of white students by sheltering them from seeing white supremacy throughout American history. It is preserving the vision of the symbols and myths of American history that the Republican civil religion proposes, and preventing students from questioning its hegemony.

The first provision dictates that no members of certain racial groups should be presented as “morally superior” to members of others groups. The Republican civil religion is based on the principle that members of their own party who maintain loyalty to its ideology are the true chosen people. The chosen people have to be morally superior in this message, because they are the ones connected to the Christian and American virtues, and the ones with the calling to spread

those virtues. If erasing discussions about racial inequality and denying Black students knowledge about their history is a part of the righteous crusade, then the morally inferior enemy they are fighting against must be those who embrace wokeness and CRT. The clear implication of the language of the bill is that its authors view the people who invented and embraced those concepts, the Black activists advocating for racial equality, as morally inferior to the followers of the Republican civil religion.

One of the aspects of the bill that has been less prominent in the ensuing backlash but no less concerning comes in lines 327-331, which claim that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence” (Individual Freedom Act of 2022). This statement is not just untrue, but somewhat dangerous. History is not a single story that can be neatly packaged, and the teaching of history is never a truly objective pursuit. Education scholars Zamudio et. al. argue that “those with power assert that their narratives are objective because they are reiterating commonly held beliefs” among groups who have historically held power and privilege (Zamudio et al. 2010, 5). Refusing to acknowledge the subjectivity of history is a failure to address and combat the bias that can be present within “commonly held beliefs.” Asserting that there is just one “knowable, teachable, testable” version of the American story means issuing a sweeping, state-sanctioned judgment on whose perspectives matter, and whose do not, in the teaching of American history.

A press release from Governor Ron DeSantis’ office announcing the introduction of the bill completely undermines the bill's own claim to objectivity with a quote from Dr. Matthew Spalding, a professor at Hillsdale College. Spalding is quoted as saying that the bill is about returning education to “its rightful place in the formation of good citizens.” Spalding claims that “We must teach our students honest and true history of America that is unifying and inspiring”

(Staff Press Release 2021). In the same breath Spalding is arguing there is an “honest and true history,” while also admitting that those who control education shape the public, and that history needs to tell a certain kind of story with a specific emotional resonance. This harkens back to Gardella’s point that civil religion produces emotional resonance, and that if applied effectively creates an emotional resonance affirms the values of that civil religion (Gardella 2013, 6). A narrative of history whose contents is determined by its capacity to produce emotional resonance is not history, it’s Republican civil religion.

This bill offers a variety of specific prescriptions for what events in history can be taught in Florida schools. The top spot on the list is occupied by the Declaration of Independence. The document receives flowery praise in the text of the bill, which states that teachers need to cover the following concepts:

“The history and content of the Declaration of Independence, including national sovereignty, natural law, self evident truth, equality of all persons, limited government, popular sovereignty, and inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property, and how they form the philosophical foundation of our government” (Individual Freedom Act of 2022)

In contrast, the Constitution takes the second slot on the list, and receives far less powerful language. The law requires instruction on “the history, meaning, significance, and effect” of the Constitution “with emphasis on each of the 10 amendments that make up the Bill of Rights” and how they form the structure of our government” (Individual Freedom Act of 2022). The Declaration of Independence receives the status of “philosophical foundation of our government,” while the Constitution is only structural. It is also interesting that the Declaration of Independence gets an “our” before government, while the Constitution does not. The Declaration of Independence is approached with the language of glory, the Constitution is approached

practically. These linguistic choices demonstrate the efforts by the writers of the bill to locate the abstract concept of American values within the Declaration of Independence, and not the Constitution.

Bellah identifies the Declaration of Independence as being central to the creation of the myth that supports civil religion. Bellah argues that “the study of religion has found that where a people conceives itself to have started reveals much about its most basic self conceptions.” In telling the origin story of America, Bellah fixates specifically on the Declaration of Independence, claiming that there is a “mythic significance of the Declaration of Independence, which is considerable” (Bellah 1975, 3). Bellah argues that the Declaration of Independence is often valued over other founding documents like the Constitution in telling a mythical story of America’s past. This is because the Constitution “does not, not explicitly at least (and in this it differs from the Declaration of Independence), call upon any source of sacredness higher than itself and its makers” (Bellah 1975, 4). By naming this document as the first requirement in the list of topics to be covered, the writers of the Bill are asserting that in their vision of American history this is the most important place to start. The colonial period is not mentioned until the sixth section, where it is thrown into a wide-ranging list that also includes the Revolutionary War, Civil War, World Wars, and Civil Rights Movement (Individual Freedom Act of 2022). The placement and framing of the Declaration of Independence in this list represents an embrace of its mythic power in the version of the American origin story that supports Republican civil religion.

The Declaration of Independence contains the famous passage: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Jefferson et al. 1776). It represents a righteous crusade against the oppression of England. God is presented as an endorser of the pursuit. Choosing to focus on the Declaration of Independence above the Constitution represents the choice to prioritize the

document asserting the abstraction of America's highest ideals over the document that resulted from the nation's first attempt to put those ideals into practice. Because the Declaration of Independence articulates America's highest ideals, it can be enjoyed and glorified uncomplicatedly. The Constitution, which contained the three-fifths compromise and only granted voting rights to white male landowners, requires a more critical eye. The Declaration of Independence represents a dream for the nation, the Constitution calls into question the extent to which it was realized. This choice of content represents the Republican mission to teach an idealized myth of American history, as opposed to exploring the triumphs and failures of America's founding in all of their complexities. Republican civil religion is elevated over nuanced scholarship.

Ron DeSantis acknowledges the mythic power of the American founding story in his autobiography *The Courage to Be Free*. DeSantis discusses the importance of civics education, and claims that American society is based on several core ideas about government. The first is "that the source of our rights is our Creator, not the government". The second is that the purpose of the Constitution is "securing our natural, God-given rights" (DeSantis 2023, 132-133). DeSantis leads off with his analysis of the core foundations of American society with two examples that mention God. This connects directly to Lynerd's description of the theology that underlines the Republican civil religion: rights come from God, and government is a tool for serving God.

DeSantis goes on to expressly allude to the concept of civil religion. He begins by evoking President Lincoln, describing Lincoln's belief that reverence for American institutions and founding documents as the key to sustaining the nation. Then DeSantis makes the following claim:

"Ensuring the students are well versed in America's "political religion" does not simply help preserve our republic; it also does justice to those who came before us. Americans have put

their lives on the line to defend our way of life since the nation's founding. The least we can do to honor them is to ensure that future generations have a firm understanding of the ideals for which they fought and died" (DeSantis 2023, 134).

Here DeSantis is playing the symbolic hits of American civil religion. First, he evokes Lincoln, a saint in the story of American civil religion. Then, he uses the symbolism of soldiers as the fullest measure of civic engagement. However, these symbols are utilized in service of fostering public support for a curriculum that takes on a very narrow view of what American ideals are and whose way of life should be defended. The unifying power that American civil religion is meant to have is not present in this discourse. Instead, it is the language of Republican civil religion.

Individual Rights and Worthiness In Republican Civil Religion:

In November 2022, a preliminary injunction preventing the enforcement of the Individual Freedom Act was issued by U.S. District Judge Mark E. Walker for the Northern District of Florida. Judge Walker claimed that the law violated the First Amendment, Fourteenth Amendment, and Equal Protection Clause, equating the health of academic freedom and debate to the health of democratic society itself. Walker accused the Florida legislature of trying to create a "Ministry of Truth," a reference to George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, that was "declaring which viewpoints shall be orthodox and which shall be verboten in its university classrooms" (Vile 2022). The state of Florida appealed this decision to a federal court. In March 2023 the federal appeals court upheld the injunction, and denied a request for stay that would allow the state to continue enforcing the law until the appeals process was complete (Elbeshbishi 2023). This action reinforces the validity of Judge Walker's initial claims that the law violated free speech protections. American civil religion speaks of universal freedoms, yet DeSantis and his allies are actively advancing legislation limiting free speech.

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), summarized this contradiction best: “To protect free speech, the government must censor. That’s the absurd argument put forth by Florida’s lawmakers.” This is free speech in name only, in service of the doctrine of the Republican civil religion. FIRE is a nonpartisan organization specializing in free speech cases, and they recently filed a lawsuit on behalf of professors and students at the University of South Florida. The suit alleges that the law’s mandates represent unconstitutional censorship. FIRE argues that the bill “threatens tens of millions of dollars in annual funding for universities that don’t crack down on faculty who “promote” an opinion on a government blacklist” and that it “encourages people to report other Americans to government authorities if they “advance” those views — all in the name of “individual freedom.”” Adam Steinbaugh, an attorney for FIRE, stated “Without the freedom to engage in vigorous and robust debate about important issues and contentious concepts, a college education is just an exercise in memorizing facts and repeating government-approved viewpoints” (FIRE 2022). In the bill’s efforts to offer some students freedom from information that they don’t want to confront, Florida Republicans have censored professors and failed to grant other students the freedom to learn.

Lynerd identifies individual liberty as one of the core elements of a Republican civil religion (Lynerd 2014, 35). This bill supposedly embraces that tenet; after all it is called the Individual Freedom Act. However, in practice it is a threat to free speech. The contradiction between the marketing of the bill and its practical implications represents what was originally labeled “the rights turn” by political scientist Andrew Lewis. The rights turn describes how the conservative movement transitioned to using the language of “free speech” and “freedom of religion” as ways to justify maintaining prejudices against minorities as other more explicitly biased moral and religious arguments became less socially acceptable. This shift has allowed conservatives to weaponize concepts of freedom against political opponents, and elevate their own grievances. This logic becomes “dog-

whistle language for conservative Christian supremacy” and serves to frame conservative Christians as “the true victims in American society.” As a result “their idea of “freedom” means “freedom for us”” (Gorski and Perry 2022, 91).

Adherents to Republican civil religion hold two complementary ideas of freedom, predicated on their conceptions of “us vs them.” The worthy “us” receives God-given sacred freedoms: like speech, assembly, or religion. The unworthy “them” will not be granted these freedoms. In fact, members of the “us” hold the freedom to exert their power and limit the rights of “them” if it is needed to reform the unworthy and preserve social order (Gorski and Perry 2022, 96). The reason the Republican civil religion’s doctrine of individual freedom can support seemingly contradictory ideas is because within that doctrine freedom is granted to only certain individuals. Free speech protects Republicans, and is a weapon against their political enemies, because followers have claimed that the chosen people defined by Republican civil religion have the monopoly on the concept of freedom. The validity of a person’s claim to individual rights is based on whether or not they conform to the prescriptions of “worthiness” within Republican civil religion.

Conclusion: The Dangers of Republican Civil Religion In Education

There are several potential long-term harms that could result from allowing a curriculum that is based on the perspectives of the Republican civil religion to be implemented in Florida. Political scientists Verlan Lewis and Hyrum Lewis discuss the dangers of allowing partisan ideology to permeate education. They argue that “education is an antidote to bias and dogmatism, but this is not true of ideologues for whom more education just means more capacity for self-deception,” and that partisan education teaches students to become better at “doubling down on errors and spinning narratives to justify tribal myths.” Developing a partisan approach to education also intensifies confirmation bias, making individuals less receptive to

information that counters their worldview and more likely to “deny empirical facts that make “their side look worse.” This can push individuals further towards ideological extremism (Lewis and Lewis 2023, 78). An amicus brief filed in a suit against this bill by the Southern Poverty Law Center argues that “far from indoctrinating students into a so-called ‘woke agenda,’ educators often struggle to teach about the history and origins of racism, resulting in a generation of high school graduates who lack basic information about the history of their country” (SPLC 2022). By favoring the messages of Republican civil religion over other critical perspectives on American history, lawmakers are raising students to be resistant to exploring nuanced perspectives on American history. This sets students up to be less effective in their college careers and have less information literacy as adults.

Banning difficult conversations about race and racism in public schools can also serve as a practical barrier to solving issues of systemic inequality of academic outcomes within the education system. The public education system has the potential to “reproduce unequal power relationships and academic outcomes” if it is managed incorrectly (Zamudio et al. 2010, 4). This should be of concern to the state of Florida, given the state's significant academic achievement gaps between white and African American PreK-12 students. According to data from the Florida Department of Education for the 2021-2022 school year the difference between white and African American student achievement is 32 percentage points in English language arts, 31 in math, 32 in science, and 24 in social studies (Florida Department of Education). The racial achievement gap is a national problem, not in any way something that is unique to Florida. However, it seems irresponsible to be suppressing conversations about race in public schools where the achievement gap is significant and grappling with systemic inequality is essential to combating it.

Republican civil religion presents a narrow vision of who is worthy of being considered a part of the chosen people based on partisan ideology. It calls followers to engage in crusades against

people and ideas they see as a threat to the position at the top of the social hierarchy that being a part of the chosen people affords them. And it promotes a narrow vision of the meaning of the symbols and myths of American civil religion that erases the nuances of American history. Combating continued racial inequality in American society requires acknowledging that it exists, and having informed citizens feel the calling to work for the common good the American civil religion is meant to provide. Allowing a partisan civil religion to undermine discussion of the challenges facing American society creates students who are unprepared to meet those challenges.

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