It has long been thought that some combination of patriotic and religious devotion is necessary to create the bond between people and nation that makes the liberal state both possible and stable. Coined by Rousseau and popularized in the United States by Robert Bellah, the term “civil religion” captures this idea of a set of religious or religion-like beliefs that sanctify a country’s origin, history, and purpose.

The question of civil religion has been raised in recent years throughout the world, but particularly in the United States and Europe. Is a civil religion really necessary to create a stable core of national unity? Does civil religion help or harm the mediation of religious difference and shared national values in the pluralistic conditions that exist in contemporary western democracies? Does civil religion provide a way of affirming religious heritage without imposing religious belief, or is it co-opted by denominational majorities? Is civil religion affirming of or counterproductive for denominational belief? Is there even room for civil religion in a secular state that faces increasing religious and cultural pluralism? Is secularism itself a civil religion? These and other questions have particular salience in the United States as the result of *Pleasant Grove City v. Summum*, a religious symbol case recently handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court, in which the Court upheld the display of a Ten Commandments monument in a city park.

This conference will examine the question of civil religion by focusing on three western democracies, plus the European Union, whose differing understandings of civil religion have become subject to re-examination and criticism as increasing religious plurality has resulted in particular civil religious controversies.

1. France, whose distinctive tradition of *laïcité* seeks to form the citizen of the Republic through a consistently secular public life, while allowing religious liberty in private life and providing substantial financial and other support of institutional religion by the national government. The meaning and function of *laïcité* came under pressure in the national head scarf controversy, and continues to be a source of discussion in light of the growing Muslim minority in France and the recent election of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

2. Italy, whose place as the seat of Catholicism for two millennia wove Christianity deeply into its culture, resulting in a “secular Christianity” in which many devotional symbols and rituals of Catholicism have acquired a secular-cultural meaning that now overshadows their original theological significance. This is evident in recent controversies over display of the crucifix in state schools and government buildings.
3. The United States, whose self-understanding as a land of religious liberty and separation of church and state is in considerable tension with a “Judeo-Christian” tradition which conceptualizes the founding of the United States as an inspired event that yielded a divinely favored nation and a chosen American people. Recent conflicts over government displays of the Ten Commandments raise questions about whether or how government adoption of Judeo-Christian symbols can be fitted to the requirements of the Establishment Clause.

4. The European Union, which, over the objections of the Pope and some of its member nations, has proposed a constitution that mentions neither God nor Christianity, at the same time that other member nations are questioning whether a Christian cultural base is essential to an idea of Europe sufficiently strong to bind European nations into a federation. These tensions are evident in the ongoing controversy over admission of Turkey to full EU membership.

The conference will consist of a keynote speech and four sessions—one for each of France, Italy, the United States, and the EU. The country sessions will each consist of a principal paper which details and considers the civil religion of that jurisdiction, and two or three commentators who will react to the themes of the principal paper. The EU session will be conducted as a roundtable discussion in which the four participants will discuss the themes of shorter papers which consider the problem of civil religion from the perspective of the EU and their individual countries.