

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

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*Religion*, derived from the Latin *religionem* (nom. *religio*), can be defined as “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The word *religio* may originally derive from *ligare* (bind, connect), probably from a prefixed *re-ligare* (i.e. *re* [again] + *ligare* [to reconnect]). Literally, religion refers to the ties that bind.

Religious practices include a variety of rituals, sermons, sacrifices, feasts, initiations, prayers, music, and other aspects of a culture or society. All religions have sacred histories and narratives, which are preserved in sacred scriptures and holy places that give a meaning to life.

The concept of *civil religion* was first introduced by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1895), who used the term in Chapter 8, Book 4 of *The Social Contract*. Rousseau used the term to describe what he viewed as the moral and spiritual foundation essential for any modern society. Civil religion, in Rousseau’s view, was intended as a form of social cement that helped unify the state by providing it with sacred authority.

Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian and Lutheran pastor who lives and works in Bethlehem, describes how the reality of empires shapes the context of the biblical stories. In his book, *Faith in the face of Empire*, Raheb observes, “Empires create their own theologies to justify their occupation. They create matrices of control for people and goods (Raheb, 2014, p. 5). Early American empires, for example, created their own theologies that justified the slaughter of Native tribes who had already occupied and land these empires later endorsed a distorted interpretation of scripture that justified slavery of people who were brought to this country involuntarily.

## American Civil Religion

The term *American Civil Religion* was coined by Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, Robert Bellah (1927-2013), who was internationally known for his work related to the sociology of religion. His 1967 article, entitled “Civil Religion in America,” which was published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, sparked controversial debates in the field of American sociology in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The topic of civil religion, which has also been called *civic religion*, became a major focus in articles and at religious sociology conferences. The debate reached its peak with the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976.

Civil religion is distinct from traditional indigenous or tribal religions, although traditional religious ceremonies are sometimes incorporated into the practice of civil religion. Standing in the center of American history, “Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) is often seen as the greatest prophet of the American civil religion” (Marty, 1987, p. 121). In his book *The Broken Covenant* Bellah (1992), argues that America has experienced three periods when a large number of Americans were cynical about the American creed: the founding of the country in the late 1770s, the Civil War (1861-1865), and the civil unrest of the 1960s.

According to Wimberley and Swatos (1998, pp. 94-96), civil religion refers to the implicit religious values of a nation, as expressed through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places (such as battlefields, monuments, and national cemeteries). Civil religion may also involve founding myths and other national myths, the invocation of God in political speeches and public monuments, the quotation of religious text by political leaders on public occasions, the veneration of past political leaders, and the veneration of veterans and casualties of the nation’s wars (Bellah, 1992).

Civil religion is not without its opponents. The most outspoken critics argue that civil religion amounts to national self-worship. Nationalism can become a form of idolatry. According to Martin Marty (1987, pp. 120-121), American religious scholar and former professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School:

Modern nationalism can be an idolatry; it has taken ugly forms in some nations and [has] been used to justify terrors. Nazism in Germany, Russian Communism, and Maoism in China are forms of nationalism that bear some marks of religion, while being godless. The nationalism of even more benevolent nations can look like religion. Americans are often more respectful of the holiness of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a kind of national shrine, than they would be in a cathedral. They are more nervous about removing a national flag from their sanctuaries than they would be about removing a cross. They die for their country as they would not for their God.

At worst, civil religion can devolve into an idolatry of politics. In a culture of narcissism, national self-interest can easily replace the higher ideals of serving those who comprise the nation. When charismatic political leaders rule by a cult of personality rather than by spiritual principles, there is a danger of endorsing the politics of contempt. In this distorted form of religion, arrogance displaces humility and contempt replaces compassion.

American Civil Religion can be understood by considering the elements that comprise this patriotic faith tradition. Some of these elements include prayer, creed, scripture, music, shrines, holy sites, religious martyrs, and others.

**Prayer**

Moment of Silence

**Creed**

Declaration of Independence  
Pledge of Allegiance (to the U.S. flag)

**First High Priest**

President George Washington

**Religious Rituals**

Salute to the American flag  
Remove head-cover during National Anthem  
Cover heart with right hand during Pledge of Allegiance

**Holy Scripture**

U.S. Constitution  
Constitutional Amendments  
Bill of Rights

**The Epistles**

The Federalist Papers

**Religious Beliefs**

“America is the land of opportunity.”  
“My achievements are because of my own efforts.”  
“You can become anything you want if you work hard enough.”

**Favorite Hymns**

Battle Hymn of the Republic  
God Bless America

**Sacred Music**

Star Spangled Banner (National Anthem)

**Steeple**

Washington Monument

**Sermons**

Presidential Inaugural Addresses  
State of the Union Address

**Sacred Grounds**

Statue of Liberty  
Lincoln Memorial

**Sacred Burial Sites**

Gettysburg National Military Park  
Tomb of the Unknown Soldier  
Arlington National Cemetery

**Holy Days**

Independent Day  
President’s Day

**Holy Shrines**

Pearl Harbor  
Shrine at the site of the former World Trade Centers

**Holy Days**

September 11

**Holy Wars**

War of Independence  
Civil War

**Holy Crusades**

The so-called War on Terror (2001—Present)  
The unending Gulf War II (2003—Present)

**Sacrificial Atonement**

American Civil War (620,000 lives sacrificed)

**Rite of Initiation**

Selective Service Registration  
Voter Registration

**Saints (Democratic)**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt  
President John F. Kennedy

**Saints (Republican)**

President Abraham Lincoln  
President Ronald Reagan

**Saints (Independent)**

President Thomas Jefferson

**Religious Martyrs**

President Abraham Lincoln  
President John K. Kennedy  
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Religious Indoctrination**

Public School System

**Religious Heresy**

Conscientious Objector status

**Religious Festivals**

Independent Day  
Memorial Day

**Sacred Objects**

LGM-118A Peacekeeper ICBM  
AGM-114 Hellfire missile

**Pax Americana**

Similar to *Pax Romana*, this peace refers to a time of decadence among elite citizens, who disregard the suffering of those in the margins of society and at the frontiers of the empire—even though the suffering of these people makes such comforts possible for the elite.

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