

HOW TO UNDERSTAND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

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 regarded as the moral and spiritual foundation essential for any modern society. Civil religion, in Rousseau’s view, was intended simply 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 can shape 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 officials and ceremonies are sometimes incorporated into the practice of civil religion. For example, 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. At worst, nationalism can become a form of idolatry. According to Martin Marty (1987, pp. 120-121):

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.

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 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.

References

- Bellah, Robert Neelly. (1967, Winter). Civil religion in America. *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96(1), 1-21.
- Bellah, Robert Neelly. (1992). *Broken covenant: American civil religion in a time of trial* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- New World Encyclopedia. (n.d.). American civil religion.
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/American_civil_religion#cite_note-RB-0
- Marty, Martin E. (1987). *Christian churches in the United States*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Religion.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion>
- Raheb, M. (2014). *Faith in the face of empire: The Bible through Palestinian eyes*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. (1895). *The social contract* (H. J. Tozer, Trans.). London, UK: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. (Original work published 1762).
- Wimberley, Ronald C., & Swatos, William H., Jr. (1998). Civil religion. In Swatos, William H., Jr. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Copyright © 2012 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content last updated 2020.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2012). How to understand American civil religion.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>