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# When Civil Religion Comes to Church

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# When Civil Religion Comes to Church

## **Abstract**

"Simply put, civil religion is the promotion of patriotism through the use of generic references to faith."

Posting about faith and patriotism from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/when-civil-religion-comes-to-church/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, civil religion, church, patriotism

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# When Civil Religion Comes to Church

 [inallthings.org/when-civil-religion-comes-to-church/](https://www.allthings.org/when-civil-religion-comes-to-church/)

Scott Culpepper

I was raised in the rural south and later served as a pastor of churches in both Louisiana and Mississippi. The connection between faith and patriotism in our region was so unconscious that few people questioned the appearance of patriotic symbols in Christian worship or even the adaptation of Christian liturgy to nationalist styles. We routinely recited not just the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag in Vacation Bible School, but also pledges to the “Christian flag” and the Bible. Memorial Day or Independence Day services always featured recognition of people who had served in various branches of the Armed Forces. In one memorable Memorial Day service, the choir sang a compilation of anthems from each branch of the armed services. It was an odd transition in the worship service to go from “Amazing Grace” to “At ’em boys, Give ’er the gun!” from the official Air Force anthem.

The mere suggestion that these practices might be inappropriate for a worship setting could spark fierce accusations of anti-Americanism in the Bible Belt. These attitudes are beginning to change with the advent of a new generation of pastors and worship leaders who are approaching the issue of civil religion or nationalism in Christian worship with more careful reflection. They are swimming against a tradition with deep roots in American history.

Simply put, civil religion is the promotion of patriotism through the use of generic references to faith. Political leaders and government entities have made use of civil religion throughout the course of American history. Yet ample evidence emerges on closer observation that the promotion of civil religion in the United States has been a two way street. How should we respond as thoughtful Christians when civil religion comes to church?

Pulpits during the American Revolution rang with appeals to support the cause of liberty in some towns while pastors in other hamlets preached loyalty to the king based on Paul’s exhortations in Romans 13 to support the civil authorities. Reverend Peter Muhlenburg of Woodstock, Virginia reportedly threw off his clerical robes behind the pulpit in 1776 to reveal the uniform of an American officer. He then recruited members of his congregation to join him in battling the British. Both Northern and Southern nationalist sentiments, one side issuing calls for abolition and the other claiming a divine mandate for slavery, poured from pulpits in the decades prior to the American Civil War.

The [Progressive Era](#) and the [Cold War](#) were two periods in American history when the presence of civil religion in American corporate worship was particularly pronounced. Many of the reform movements of the Progressive Era were energized by the idealism of reform minded Christians who saw in progressive education and social activism a means for the spread of positive Christian influence in American society. This era saw the birth of Vacation Bible School and the creation of the aforementioned Christian flag.

Often identified by historians as the first Christian radio star, [Aimee Semple McPherson](#), of the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, routinely combined American nationalist symbols with her charismatic worship services. Local congregations and parachurch ministries mobilized during the Cold War era to aid the United States government in drawing a contrast between what they identified as “Judeo-Christian” American culture and official Soviet atheism. Incorporations of patriotic symbolism by Christian media stars such as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell were imitated by Christian leaders and their congregations across the land.

Alongside this acceptance of civil religion in American worship, there has flowed another stream fed by traditions less comfortable with the easy identification of Christian faith with nationalist goals. The experiences of assimilated immigrant communities who arrived before the American Revolution and those brought by later arrivals of coreligionists from the same regions produced very different responses to civil religion in the nineteenth century. Assimilated immigrants were comfortable assuming compatibility between their religious and American identities.

More recent immigrants from Europe, often more suspicious of democratic movements in their countries of origin, tended to more readily recognize the potential pitfalls of so closely identifying their faith with nationalism. These tensions emerged among groups such as Italian and Irish Roman Catholics, German Lutherans, and the Dutch Reformed. Some Dutch Reformed congregations in Iowa and Michigan were subject to harassment and charges of disloyalty during World War I for their refusal to incorporate patriotic symbols like the American flag into their corporate worship. Christian traditions with such transnational ties and an immigrant heritage can offer much needed counter-cultural approaches when it comes to the excesses of civil religion.

So what do we do when civil religion comes to church? Is it ever appropriate to acknowledge national symbols in corporate worship? These questions, like all questions related to worship and devotional practice, are deeply personal and depend as much on the motives behind what we do as the actual practices themselves. I have grown far less comfortable with the incorporation of nationalism in corporate worship over the years.

I worked as a young pastor to emphasize the importance of keeping a healthy distinction between our responsibilities as Christian citizens in the political sphere and our identity as kingdom citizens in the sphere of congregational life. How do we operate responsibly and reformatively in both spheres? There is certainly legitimate space in corporate worship to remind congregants that people of faith have an important place and roles to fill in our society. We have the right and the responsibility as American citizens to apply the insights of our faith to the ethical and social problems of our day. It is also a positive thing to encourage and support those who have sacrificed to serve in the military, though not with the mixture of military rally and worship service I witnessed in my youth.

But illegitimate conflation of any spheres can create confusion as well as idolatry. Importing political partisanship into Christian worship leads to division over secondary issues and distraction from the primary goals of worship. We need look no further than the Old Testament prophets to remind us of another con of civil religion. When faith becomes the servant of the state, the faithful stand in danger of losing their prophetic voice. Like the court prophets of Ahab, we start to parrot the party line of the governing authorities rather than challenging the spirits of the age (1 Kings 22). Examples abound both in history and all around us in this election year. Worship itself morphs into an opportunity to promote human agendas and ideologies rather than a quest to know and experience the priorities of God when it is captive to civil religion.