



5-23-2023

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Abstract

"The holiday has had a complicated relationship with religion and contentious issues around our national identity."

Posting about Memorial Day from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/unsung-holiday-memorial-day-and-christian-patriotism/>

Keywords

In All Things, Memorial Day, patriotism, rites and ceremonies, civil religion

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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

Unsung Holiday: Memorial Day and Christian Patriotism

Donald Roth

May 26, 2023

If I'm honest, I didn't really think much of Memorial Day growing up. We didn't typically get out of school until early June, so I don't even recall if we had the day off or not. I grew up in Southern California, but in Missouri, where my wife grew up, they got out earlier, so Memorial Day was often a sort of "first day of summer" celebration.

The importance of the day changed dramatically for both of us two years ago when her brother, Seth Vande Kamp, was killed in a helicopter crash while serving as a U.S. Army doctor in Egypt. Suddenly the day took on a meaning more in line with its original intent. From either an overlooked holiday or a cheerful celebration of summer, the day has become one of revisited grief, solemn ceremonies, and a constant reminder of the refrain "all gave some, some gave all." We talk about many holidays losing their significance in popular memory, but as part of our "unsung holidays" series on In All Things, I felt compelled to write about Memorial Day because my family will never easily forget the "reason for the season."

Memorial Day has roots in the Civil War, coming into its current form in 1971 as an official remembrance of those who died while in active-duty service in the armed forces. From the beginning, if [Wikipedia](#) is to be trusted, the holiday has had a complicated relationship with religion and contentious issues around our national identity. In an age when an idolatrous merger of God and country is typically dismissed by the political Right and framed as an all-encompassing boogey man for the political Left, Memorial Day embodies a number of reasons why this is such a difficult issue.

The principal difficulty arises from the fact that honoring the dead simply doesn't feel like it should be so controversial. Frankly, it shouldn't be. I'm proud of my brother-in-law's honorable service.

At the same time, death is a time when the desire to find meaning is particularly poignant, and patriotism can offer a sense of ultimate value. It's not uncommon to hear that there can be no higher sacrifice than to give one's life for their country. Further, the military knows how to remember its own, and there is a powerful, sincere sense of belonging and offered meaning that enfolds a grieving family at a time when they need these things most.

It could be a healthy self-awareness as a conservative, or it could be that I'm infected with the same contrarian nature that afflicts many academics, but I still feel a tension around these memorial ceremonies.¹ America has long promoted civil religion, where a domesticated religiosity adds a sense of transcendence to exercises ultimately oriented toward a sense of national pride. If that civil religion had a high holy day, Memorial Day would be a good contender for that position, especially for those who have personal connection to its purpose.

This is the fundamental challenge. At these ceremonies, we can view the religious element as creating a space for Christians to express their deep beliefs, or we can see an invitation to baptize nationalism and make it more palatable to us. Frankly, at these ceremonies, both are on offer. Yet the deep truth is that Christ cannot be domesticated by Caesar. As much as civil religion seeks to co-opt our hearts, it is a heresy.

Why do I say heresy? Because heresies take something Christian and distort it in a way that amounts to less than what the Bible calls us to. In this case, it appeals to religious sensibilities while providing a sense of meaning that is rooted first and foremost in sacrifice to the nation. It elevates patriotism to a status of ultimacy that goes beyond "seeking the welfare of the city."² Our national home is part of God's good provision for us, but it is not an ultimate good.

So where does this leave us? Must Christians shun patriotism? Worse still, should we skirt dishonoring the dead by avoiding ceremonies meant to honor their sacrifice? In his recent book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, Christopher Watkin offers an alternative in his exposition of Luke 20.

When confronted on the issue of paying taxes, Jesus asked whose image was on the denarius and gave the famous response, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Watkin points out the irony that the image on the coin, Caesar, was in fact a person made in the image of God. As a result, rendering unto Caesar was actually part and parcel of rendering honor to God. This is not because Caesar had the power to pull God into his service; instead, God made Caesar in His image and used Caesar to provide for the welfare of His people. In this way, a Christian submitting and paying taxes is not offering a split service of paying dues to Rome on one hand and God on the other; it all goes back to God's glory.

This is an example of what Watkin calls *diagonalization*, where things we treat as a dichotomy are recontextualized by Biblical truth. In this case, where the Right is prone to blur God and Country, and the Left might see them as oil and water, the call we see in Jeremiah 29 and Luke 20 aligns the two without confusing them. My brother-in-law gave his life while seeking the welfare of the people the Lord sent him to serve. It is right for these people to honor this sacrifice, but the honor of Caesar is a shadow of something more. The greater honor is in the testimony Seth left in his short time, putting the interests of his colleagues before his own. It lies in his *Christlike testimony* to the humility, gentleness, and patience we are all called to in Ephesians 4. The greater honor lies in the way *Seth imaged His God*.

I encourage you to think about attending a ceremony this Memorial Day. They are powerful, and the lives commemorated are worthy of honor. At the same time, it's okay not to be totally comfortable there. After all, these ceremonies typically don't complete the story. The ultimate value of a life lost is not found in the welfare of the country that it helped sustain.

Instead, we can remember whose image lays on each and every life lost in Caesar's service. We can remember the sovereign God who provides for us even through tragic loss. For the fallen claimed by both Christ and country, we can remember that their real meaning lies in the "well done, good and faithful servant" that their Father proclaimed over each of them as He called them to His side. Ultimately, we can join these families across the nation in groaning and longing for the coming Day when we will all realize the full inheritance secured for us by the One who truly gave all so that He might gather each of us to Himself.

Celebrations, holidays, traditions. Many memories attach themselves to special moments outside the daily rhythms of ordinary life. Often connected with food, smells, stories, and participation, how and what do you pause to celebrate? Maybe some of these "Unsung Holidays" will inspire you to gather people, create a new memory, and celebrate a beauty within God's world.

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1. Similar tensions can be felt during 4th of July celebrations and Veteran's Day observations.
 2. Jer. 29:7