

Civil religion: lowest common denominator or common ground?

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Some Baptists see civil religion as bland at best and idolatrous at worst. But others view broadly shared values of liberty, justice and acknowledgement of God's providential care as a common ground Christians share with a majority of their fellow citizens.

American civil religion, as defined by sociologist [Robert Bellah](#), includes rituals, symbols and beliefs institutionally separate from organized religion but derived from it. Examples include the ceremonial use of prayer in public settings and generic references to deity in political speech.

Politicians who sprinkle the language of Zion into political rhetoric and preachers who offer blessings for partisan political agendas corrupt genuine religion by dragging God down and lifting national interests up to the level of idolatry, some church-state experts insist.

Legitimate love for country becomes sinful veneration of a nation "when people allow any form of civil religion to replace heartfelt devotion to God," said church historian Jim Spivey, senior fellow at the [B.H. Carroll Theological Institute](#).

Spivey highlighted five warning signs of idolatrous nationalism:

- "Using empty slogans to play on people's patriotic emotions."
- "Parading political candidates before denominational conventions or letting them use the pulpit to promote political party agendas."

- “Using strained biblical interpretations to justify wrongful political and social actions.”
- “Using the Bible to guarantee people economic prosperity and then identifying that prosperity with the American way of life.”
- “Ignoring biblical mandates for social activism when they inconveniently threaten the traditional American way of life.”

Baptizing partisan politics or nationalistic rhetoric with the language of civil religion essentially places God in a role subservient to national interests, said [James Dunn](#), resident professor of Christianity and public policy at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

“It is making God the national mascot. It is pulling God down from God-ness to a subhuman level,” he said.

A lowest-common-denominator civil religion that invokes the name of God for blessing without regard to the content of faith rings hollow, Dunn insists.

“Ceremonial religion is gutless, sterile, empty and meaningless,” he said.

But Rob James, retired professor of religion at the University of Richmond, expressed his preference for the term “American public religion” over “civil religion,” and he sees it as common ground rather than lowest common denominator.

“There are values we share with the majority of our countrymen who may or may not be Christian,” he said.

“I think we sometimes have beat up people for embracing public religion as intrinsically idolatrous and as something the government does to manipulate them to support some of its policies.”

Baptists rightly have emphasized the importance of the institutional separation of church and state as a guarantee of religious liberty, James said.

However, he asserted, moderate Baptists—in particular—sometimes have driven socially conservative Christians into the arms of the Religious Right by failing to acknowledge the proper place of patriotism.

“We overdo it sometimes,” James said. “We make people feel like it’s an either/or proposition—that they can’t be both a committed Christian and a patriotic American. That’s a sad mistake. ...

“By no means should we back away from the separation of church and state, but we need to correct some mistakes in how it is understood. Perhaps we should modulate our language so that that it doesn’t exclude legitimate Christian patriotism, rightly interpreted. I think it’s good to do, and it’s stupid not to do it.”