THE ANONYMOUS GOD

The Church Confronts Civil Religion
and American Society

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Polytheism

The New Face of American Civil Religion

ALVIN J. SCHMIDT

Although scholars of religion in the United States have during the last fifty years analyzed and published numerous articles and books on American civil religion, the topic or concept has not been a household word. Even in many formal religious contexts such as Bible classes, Sunday morning sermons, or congregational meetings, American church members (including members of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregations) have not heard the topic discussed.

However, since the catastrophic events that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, and some of the formal religious activities that soon followed these events, more Christians are now hearing discussions concerning American civil religion, prompted by events such as: the interreligious assembly (Christians, Jews, and Muslims) that met for the “Day of Prayer and
Remembrance” in Washington’s National Cathedral three days later on September 14; the religious gathering of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu representatives who met for “A Prayer for America” in Yankee Stadium on September 23; the first anniversary memorial service held in Columbia, South Carolina, to commemorate the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001; and the memorial service conducted for space shuttle Columbia’s astronauts in Cleveland, Ohio, on February 8, 2003. These interreligious gatherings illustrate American civil religion in action. But still more, they reveal that the nature of American civil religion has changed from its deistic posture, which had characterized it since the mid-1700s, to a polytheistic stance.

WHAT IS AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION?

American civil religion goes back to the Puritans, who arrived on ten ships in 1630 and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony under the leadership of John Winthrop. (This group is not to be confused with an earlier contingent of Puritans, commonly known as the Pilgrims, who came on the Mayflower and set up Plymouth Colony on Cape Cod in 1620.) Winthrop’s new Americans saw their religious beliefs intertwined with their new country’s future status. As God guided ancient Israel to its Promised Land, Canaan, so the Puritans believed He had also guided them to a Promised Land, America. Here they would establish “a city on the hill,” as Winthrop, the Bay Colony’s first governor, expressed it. America would be a religious commonwealth, for all (especially England) to see as a Christian model.

As American civil religion in its early years was largely confined to the Puritan Christian population, it had a decided Christian aura. By the time a century and a half passed after the Puritans had set foot on the shores of America, this civil religion had become deistic. Yet this change did not alter the early American Puritan belief, also held by many prominent and influential deistic
Americans, that their country was the Promised Land, similar to what the land of Canaan was for the ancient Israelites when they came out of Egypt. Two such influential individuals were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

After the Declaration of Independence was signed by John Hancock on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress commissioned a committee of three (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson) to design the Great Seal of the United States. Franklin drew the biblical image of Moses lifting his wand and dividing the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his charioteers drowning, clearly a reference to God guiding the Puritans and other emigrants to America, the Promised Land. Somewhat similarly, Jefferson tried to depict the Israelites being led through the wilderness by a cloud during the day and by a pillar of fire at night, implying that the early Americans were the new Israelites whom God guided in their exodus from Europe to the Promised Land of America. Franklin's and Jefferson's designs, though never adopted as the Great Seal of the United States, form two examples of the civil religious heritage that was already 150 years old at the time of American independence.

While the phenomenon of self-reflective civil religion goes back historically at least to the ancient Romans, who believed their various pagan religious beliefs should serve civic objectives, it was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who first coined the term in 1762 when he published his book The Social Contract. He discussed this concept in book four, the eighth chapter titled “Civil Religion.” Rousseau believed that civil religion would sanctify and legitimate France’s values and practices and thereby create social cohesion between the people and the country. His discussion was clearly influenced by ancient Rome's civil religious rites. He wanted French civil religion to reflect the meaning of the Latin word religare, a social bond between the Roman people and the state. He did not like the idea that the early Christians did not see themselves as members of the Roman state and its ties to various gods.
because they saw themselves as belonging to a separate spiritual kingdom, one not of this world. The socioreligious bond of the Romans that Rousseau desired for the French is explained by one historian:

In the mind of the ancient world the association between religious unity and political unity was so intimate that the concept of political unity could never have been complete unless religion was associated with it. One state, one worship, was to that world an idea as old as time.

Rousseau wanted a governmental leader to establish France's civil religion. He wanted this leader to be duty-bound "to decide upon articles, not precisely as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociality without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject." But his suggested model did not materialize.

More than half a century after Rousseau's proposal, his own countryman Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the United States in 1831, noted the following in his work Democracy in America (1834): "In France, I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America... they were intimately united and they reigned in common over the same country." He also observed that religion in America was "indispensable to the maintenance of [its] republican institutions." Citing these and other observations regarding the role of religion vis-a-vis political life in the United States, "Tocqueville presented a model of American civil religion in which religious belief and morality were fused with a political system of democratic values and laws." Indeed, what Rousseau wanted the state to impose on France as civil religion was by 1831 operating in America. Here, no political leader or state imposed it. Rather, it developed and functioned voluntarily and independent of the state.

When Will Herberg in Protestant—Catholic—Jew (1955) wrote of America fusing religion with its national purposes, he had...
in mind the phenomenon of civil religion, even though he did not use the term. Similarly, when Martin E. Marty in New Shape of American Religion (1959) discussed the American belief in a “religion-in-general,” he, too, had in mind America’s civil religion. More recently, Robert Bellah, who brought the concept of civil religion to the attention of the academic world in 1967, defined American civil religion as consisting of “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity.” These national beliefs, symbols, and rituals, Bellah argued, give the United States a bond of national unity.

American civil religion today has a number of key characteristics. It is a religion that uses generic terms for God: the Almighty, Creator, Providence, our Maker, Supreme Being, etc.; it does not define God; it commonly does not see Him as a God of judgment; it makes no mention of heaven and certainly not hell. It embodies a strong belief in the American way of life: democracy, freedom, equality, justice, tolerance, progress, opportunity. It has its own holy days: Memorial Day, Independence Day (July 4), Thanksgiving Day, presidential inaugurals. It has its own sayings, such as “In God We Trust” on coins and paper currency; Annuit Coeptis (He has favored our undertaking) on the one dollar bill’s backside; and the Pledge of Allegiance. It has its own doctrines, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. It has its own saints: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln. Finally, American civil religion has its own shrines: the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson’s Monticello, Valley Forge, Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty, the Alamo, Arlington Cemetery.

In light of the above, American civil religion may be defined as the deeply held beliefs that unite Americans regarding their nation’s values and practices pertaining to freedom, democracy, equality, progress, opportunity, toleration, and justice, which are portrayed by patriotic symbols in collective gatherings where they are publicly revered and honored as sacred because the values they symbolize.
are given by God, who is undefined, and who has chosen the United States to play a special, salutary role in human history.

**AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION BECOMES DEISTIC**

With its Puritan orientation in the 1630s, American civil religion initially had a Christian aura. But, as indicated above, 150 years later it had become increasingly deistic. Then, for the following 200 years and more (from about 1750 to the 1980s), participants in American civil religious ceremonies commonly called upon “God” in deistic language that portrayed Him in anonymous, generic terms. Consistent with deism, this god was thought to have revealed himself in the laws of nature but not through Jesus Christ in biblical revelation. This god governed the world by natural laws that, one advocate argued, “are like Himself immutable . . . [and] violations of these laws, or miraculous interference in the movements of nature, must be necessarily excluded from the grand system of universal existence.” If Christians in civil religious ceremonies understood the anonymous or generic invocations as trinitarian, that was, of course, their prerogative. But it was likewise the prerogative of deists and other non-Christians to understand such references to the divine as totally unrelated to the Christian Trinity. The focus was not on Jesus Christ but on one divine, anonymous being. Since the 1980s, civil religion in the United States has shifted from deism to an increasingly polytheistic posture, as will be discussed below. But first it is necessary to probe further into the deistic stage of American civil religion.

**THE BRITISH CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION’S DEISM**

For the most part, the deistic movement developed in England during the 1600s and early 1700s. It was a product of the Age of Enlightenment, or the “Age of Reason,” as the American deist
Thomas Paine called it. This age produced several deistic writers. Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), often called the father of British deism, wrote *De Veritate*. John Toland (1670–1732) penned *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Anthony Collins (1676–1729) authored *Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*. Thomas Woolston (1669–1733) wrote *Discourses on the Miracles of Our Savior*, and Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) issued *Christianity as Old as Creation*. In one way or another, all of these publications questioned biblical revelation and the supernatural accounts in the Bible that comprise many of Christianity’s teachings. These writers contended that only through human reason, guided by the “Book of Nature” (natural religion), can one know and understand God. Thus nature, not the Bible, was God’s revelation. Given these premises, Tindal’s book, *Christianity as Old as Creation*, for instance, took the next logical step by formally denying the deity of Christ.

The deistic impact of these and related writings soon traversed the Atlantic to colonial America, where it shaped the religious beliefs of many Founding Fathers. For instance, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, became an avowed deist early in life. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the nation’s third president, revealed his deistic convictions in the Declaration by employing the terms “Creator” and “Nature’s God.” It is well known that he excised all miracles in the New Testament Gospels with a scissors, producing the so-called “Jefferson Bible.”

George Washington (1732–1799), head of the Continental Army, chairman of the Constitutional Convention, and the first president under the Constitution, revealed his deistic bent by frequently referring to God in generic or anonymous terms, such as “Providence,” “Heaven,” “Supreme Being,” “Great Ruler of Nations,” and so on. When Benedict Arnold’s plans to deliver West Point’s post and garrison to the British (plans that included the British
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capture of Washington himself) were averted, Washington saw it as the “interposition of Providence.” In his first presidential inaugural address (1789), Washington referred to God as “the invisible hand that conducts the affairs of men. . . .” In this address he also spoke of “the propitious smiles of Heaven. . . .” In his twenty volumes of correspondence he mentioned Jesus Christ only once, in a speech to the Delaware Indian chiefs. Paul Boller, an historian of Washington, believes an aide wrote this reference and Washington simply read it without editing it. Boller adds that in all of Washington’s letters to his friends and associates he never mentioned the name of Jesus Christ.

Other American Founding Fathers were also known deists, such as John Adams (1735–1826), the country’s second president, even though he called himself “a church-going animal,” and James Madison (1753–1835), the father of the Constitution and the nation’s fourth president. All of these prominent figures, as well as others, contributed to the deistic nature of American civil religion that characterized it until the twentieth century’s last couple of decades.

FREEMASONRY’S CONNECTION TO DEISM IN AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION
Before the late 1600s, Freemasonry in England consisted mostly of stonemasons, whose lodge meetings, according to its Old Charges (a.k.a. Gothic Constitutions), included trinitarian Christian prayers and required members to be loyal to the church. But in 1717 British Freemasonry reorganized itself to become a fraternity whose members no longer were operative masons, and in 1723 it revised its Old Charges, some of which dated back to the 1390. In the 1723 revisions, it absorbed the deistic spirit that was then in the air. Briefly put, the revised Masonic charges, which became known as Anderson’s Constitutions, “replaced Christianity by deism,” as shown by two renowned British historians of Freemasonry.
Reorganized Freemasonry was nontrinitarian in orientation. It emphasized deeds, not Christian creeds. In line with this emphasis, it focused on symbolic/speculative meanings of what once were operative masonry’s ancient tools. The square, for instance, now symbolized living one’s life on the square, that is, being morally upright. The level symbolized equality among members. The compass meant circumscribing one’s passions; the white lambskin apron conveyed purity and innocence; the trowel stood for cementing brotherly behavior; and so on.

By the mid-1700s deistically oriented Freemasonry was well established in colonial America, where it also had become an influential sociopolitical force. In the words of Bernard Faï, a French scholar of Masonry:

Freemasonry in the colonies was the center around which were grouped all the fashionable young men ... where social organization was still in a rudimentary state, it constituted the most important intercontinental network ... it attracted the most prominent persons.19

The Masonic influence in America, especially on events that occurred from 1765 to 1800, has been largely overlooked by American historians. Thus this influence is not recorded in high school or college history books, and noting this influence often comes as news to many. In this regard, the observation of Philip Roth, a Masonic historian, is pertinent:

One may turn in vain to the indexes of a complete library of standard works upon American history for any except the most casual reference to an institution [that is, Freemasonry] that drew together in the bonds of unity and brotherly love the leading citizens of scores of Colonial towns and villages.20

Still another observer of Freemasonry’s influence on the United States, especially in the eighteenth century, has stated: “Freemasonry in America was in fact a kind of religion, as real as
Christianity to many, and more real to some." Recent research has shown that Freemasonry itself in some ways functions as an American civil religious organization.

The longstanding presence of American civil religion owes much to the deistic influences Freemasonry has had on it. The highly influential deist Benjamin Franklin, who helped shape and direct much of the ideology and political structure of the United States government, was a staunch Freemason to the end of his 84 years of life. He was also a strong advocate of civil religion, which he called “publick religion.” History, he argued, shows that public religion is beneficial to society. In this context, he even mentioned “the Excellency of the Christian Religion,” which was, he said, “above all others, antient [sic] or modern.” However, we must remember that Franklin’s understanding of the Christian religion, like that of all deists, referred only to Christianity’s moral teachings, not its Christ-centered soteriological doctrines.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that George Washington, who, as already noted, liked to use deistic terms for God, was also a member of the Masonic lodge. On September 18, 1793, even as president of the country, he participated in a Masonic cornerstone-laying of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., and there he wore a Masonic apron. Many other Founding Fathers, too numerous to mention here, were also Freemasons. They were well-represented in the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and also in formulating the federal Constitution in 1787. These two documents are the most significant pillars of the American nation.

Deistic convictions are evident in many of the thoughts and actions of the Founding Fathers. Those who were Freemasons either acquired these convictions in Masonic lodge gatherings or had them reinforced there. Those who were not Masons, such as Samuel Adams, John Adams, and others, had similar deistic beliefs through close associations with their Masonic friends as well as through reading similar literature. John Adams once said, “Many of
my best friends have been Masons." When he succeeded Washington as president, the religious utterances of Adams were as deistic as those of any Mason. For instance, upon being elected to the presidency, he referred to God as “Sovereign of the Universe, the Ordainer of civil government on earth. . . .”

**AMERICA’S PRESENT**
**POLYTHEISTIC CIVIL RELIGION**

Until the early 1980s, as indicated above, American civil religion was decidedly deistic. But as multiculturalism and its complementary force of political correctness gained ascendancy in the United States at this time, and as public officials began genuflecting before the altar of multiculturalism, American civil religion became increasingly polytheistic. In the canons of multiculturalism, not only are all cultures equal, so also are all religious beliefs. Hence, much of American civil religion now resembles the polytheistic civil religion of the pagan Roman Empire. Today the different pagan gods of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other pagan groups are given equal honor and recognition in numerous American civil religious ceremonies.

The polytheistic nature of American civil religion today is largely the product of contemporary multiculturalism. However, precedent for it was set early on, with Virginia’s Act for Religious Freedom of 1786. In draft form this act attempted to say that religious coercion was contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. According to Thomas Jefferson, this reference to Christ was rejected in deference to Jews, infidels, and Hindus. Thus the name of Jesus Christ was omitted, even though the proposed draft had not assigned any divine status to Him. The mere mention of Christ's name proved unacceptable to Virginia’s deistically influenced legislators. Deism, together with the desire not to offend infidels or Hindus (polytheists), had its way with them. But the act in
its final form did more than avoid offending a polytheistic group. It also opened the door to honoring multiple gods in America’s civil religious ceremonies.

It would be interesting to research the degree of influence exerted by those who backed Virginia’s Act for Religious Freedom of 1786 on the United States Constitution of 1787. Notably, the Constitution does not mention God at all, unlike the Declaration of Independence that uses deistic terms in reference to God. Further, in Article VI, the Constitution prohibits religious tests for public officeholders. Was the Constitution in effect a second hand extended in openness to polytheists, present or future?

At any rate, Virginia’s course of action in 1786 is not surprising in light of Freemasonry’s influence on the formation of early American sociopolitical values. For when Freemasonry revised its constitutions in 1723 and became deistic, it also welcomed members from polytheistic religions. To this day, Freemasonry (except on the Continent) requires what it calls the “Volume of the Sacred Law” (VSL) to be placed on a lodge’s altar during its sessions. In the United States, Canada, England, and Australia the VSL is commonly the Bible. In Muslim countries it is the Qur’an, in a Mormon lodge it is the Book of Mormon, and in India it is the Bhagavad-Gita of the Hindus, etc.

Although the United States formally does not have a pantheon of gods as did ancient Rome, it does have a modern parallel in many of its civil religious activities, such as when Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others gather jointly to call upon different, even multiple, gods to protect America’s national values, the American Way of Life. Such assemblies demonstrate that American civil religion is no longer the belief in a god-in-general but a syncretistic belief in many gods-in-general.
TWO MISSING INGREDIENTS:
UNCONDITIONAL GOSPEL AND SOLUS CHRISTUS

As already noted, a major shift occurred in American civil religion within a century and a half after Puritan Christians laid its foundation in the 1630s. By about the mid-eighteenth century, the initial Christian orientation became deistic. How did this happen? Any attempt to answer such a question in limited space is obviously fraught with the danger of oversimplification. I shall attempt to provide a brief answer, nevertheless, because this answer can be instructive for us as we face polytheistic civil religion today.

Beside factors such as the influence of deism in America, particularly in the form of Freemasonry, changes occurred among America's Puritans themselves that eventually complemented a deistic outlook. The preaching and teaching prevalent among the Puritans from 1630 to the mid-1700s increasingly urged members to fulfill and uphold their Christian moral duties and responsibilities by performing good deeds. Although God's grace was not totally ignored, it is quite clear in Puritan sermons that man was urged to do good works to give evidence of his salvation, rather than doing them in appreciation for salvation. It made little difference whether the sermons came from John Winthrop (1588–1649), John Cotton (1584–1652), Thomas Shepard (1605–1649), Increase Mather (1639–1723), Cotton Mather (1663–1728), or others. All of them exhorted hearers to live a God-pleasing life, to keep God's covenant intact. In other words, while there was considerable variation among preachers of the Puritan covenant theology, they had at least this much in common: In terms of the distinction between Law and Gospel, their sermons typically contained much Law with little or no unconditional Gospel message to motivate people to bring forth the works expected of them.

Closely related to this lack of clear Gospel motivation, one finds no sermon references to the biblical teaching of solus Christus,
namely, that God can only be found in Jesus Christ and that there is no salvation outside of Him. "Neither the human person of Jesus nor the incarnate Logos nor the mystery of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ [was] a theme of lively interest in the Federal [covenant] Theology."28 Here the "Gospel-Covenant" theology of Peter Bulkeley (1583–1659) can be cited as an example. One observer noted that Bulkelely's version of Puritan theology did in effect "diminish Christ as the sole agent of redemption by reinstating the exemplarity of Abraham."29

As the sermons of Puritan Congregationalists strongly urged people to exercise their duties and responsibilities without an unconditional Gospel message to motivate them, it is not difficult to see how the emphasis on "deeds, rather than creeds" (a popular phrase of the deists), gained ascendancy. Sermons by Presbyterians and Episcopalians also strongly emphasized deeds with either weak or no Gospel motivation. In a spiritual environment where human deeds receive the main emphasis, Christ's redemptive act of salvation is not the motivating force to pursue them, and solus Christus is not accented, it is not difficult to see why morally-minded individuals opted for a deistic brand of theology compatible with the religious philosophy of Freemasonry. In fact, by the early 1800s many congregations with Puritan Congregationalist roots, "particularly in Boston and its environs, became Unitarian."30 The eighteenth-century Puritans (Congregationalists), Episcopalians, and Presbyterians furnished many of the influential Founding Fathers who shaped the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These men not only formulated the country's major documents, but they also provided the deistic philosophy that for the next two hundred years would characterize American civil religion.

Two centuries later, in late twentieth-century America's environment of multiculturalism and political correctness, there has been virtually no opposition to the move from a deistically oriented civil religion to one that is now polytheistic. In this respect,
the recent shift resembles the earlier move to deism. The relatively longstanding practice of preaching a weak or shrouded Gospel, together with the absence of solus Christus, facilitated the shift to deism in America’s civil religion in the eighteenth century. More recently, it has made possible an unopposed transition to polytheism (along with many of its pagan elements) in a nation that does not seem to realize or care that polytheism brings with it paganism.

**EQUATING FAITH WITH RELIGION: A POLYTHEISTIC CIVIL RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON**

For some time Americans, as well as many others, have been equating faith with religion, regardless of whether that religion is Christian or not. Thus we hear people speak about “the Muslim faith,” “the Hindu faith,” “the Buddhist faith,” and, of course, “the Christian faith.” Equating faith with religion has even become a part of today’s political language. President George W. Bush speaks of “faith-based initiative” programs.

The equation of faith with religion slights Christianity. First, it ignores the important fact that the use of the word faith in the religious sense is of Christian origin. Really, it is a Christian innovation. Although the English word faith translates the Greek word pistis and the Latin fide, neither of these words had any religious connotations among the pagan Greeks or Romans. As one scholar has observed, “‘Faith’ as a central category of Greek religious language did not exist.” Neither did the Greeks or Romans use “faith” as a term for a body of religious knowledge or truth, as the New Testament does in Acts 6:7; Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 4:1, 6; Titus 1:4; and Jude 3. Nor did they use the word faith as a synonym for religion, as many Christians do today when, for instance, they speak of “the Muslim faith” or “the Hindu faith.”
Second, such speech slights Christianity by misrepresenting it. It implies that Christianity is like non-Christian religions: namely, that its teachings, like theirs, are also based only on “faith” without any factual foundation. This is false! Christianity is the only religion whose faith is linked to historical facts. For example, faith in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ rests upon the fact that He did indeed rise from the dead, a phenomenon that happened in real history, not in the faith of His disciples. It is not the faith of Christians that makes Christ’s resurrection true and valid, but rather it is His physical resurrection that makes their faith true and valid. In short, the Christian concept of faith is not faith in faith itself. Christians do not have a faith that stands independent of any historical facts or referents. Unfortunately, the latter is how our society, including many religious leaders, speak of faith today. Believing in something for which there is no evidence is not faith. In Christian theology it is no faith at all.

The classical Greeks saw faith as “the lowest grade of cognition: it was the state of mind of the uneducated, who believe[d] things on hearsay without being able to give reasons for their belief.” But that is not how the New Testament speaks of faith. For instance, St. Paul told skeptics that if they did not believe Christ had risen from the dead, they could ask some 500 people who had seen Him after His resurrection. Paul also stated that if Christ had not risen, the faith of Christians was empty (1 Corinthians 15:6, 14). Further, Christ did not tell doubting Thomas to accept His resurrection on mere faith, without evidence. Instead, He let Thomas see and touch His crucifixion wounds. That experience moved Thomas to say, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). It produced the greatest confession of faith recorded in the entire Bible, and it demonstrates again that the Christian faith is based on real historical facts.

Christians have from the beginning been urged to give sound reasons for their faith. St. Peter told first-century Christians: “But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being pre-
pared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Such a concept of faith was unimaginable to the ancient Greeks, and it is absent from all non-Christian religions. Thus to use the term “faith” in reference to other religions not only slights Christianity, it also compliments and lends support to those religions! Recognizing the powerful effect of language, Christians need to make a deliberate, conscious, and consistent effort to cease and desist using the term “faith” when referring to any non-Christian religious group. Instead, they should say “the Buddhist religion,” “the Hindu religion,” etc. Similarly, Christians also should not use the term “interfaith” when referring to a civil religious event in which one or more non-Christian religions are represented.

**AN EXAMPLE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY**

By the time Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in A.D. 313, the early Christians had for 300 years spurned all polytheistic civil religious activities of ancient Rome, even though the pagan Romans expected them to take part. Their example can be helpful for American Christians who are urged by many in today’s multiculturalist environment to participate in America’s polytheistic civil religious events. We do well to examine further the early Christians’ refusal to participate in Rome’s civil religious activities.

They were not moved by the Roman notion that the state’s religious values and its people formed a common bond, each reinforcing the other. Instead, they saw themselves as the ecclesia (“called-out” ones), a people whom God Himself “called ... out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Early Christians also believed that if they honored Rome’s many gods, they would be engaged in idolatry and thus deny the true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They refused to call the emperor “Lord,” which the Romans saw as a civil religious duty. The Christian rejection of
these civil religious practices angered the Romans, who therefore saw Christians as exclusivists, even as atheists.34

A common civil religious ritual among the Romans consisted of performing libations, that is, pouring or sprinkling wine, oil, or some other liquid substance on a deified object or statue. The latter was frequently a replica of the emperor, whom the Romans commonly saw as deus (god). Nor did the Christians participate in offering firstfruits, man-made food articles, or frankincense, which were either burned on altars or placed on sacrificial tables. Most of the complying Roman populace performed these civil religious rituals and activities perfunctorily. Personal devotion or commitment in religious activities was not necessary. Still, this did not make them acceptable to the Christians. Thus Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 100–166), an early Christian apologist martyred under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, informs us that Romans often accused Christians of being atheists for refusing to participate in Rome’s civil religious practices. Justin wrote: “And neither do we honor with many sacrifices and garlands of flowers deities as men have formed and set in shrines and called gods” (First Apology, 9). In the early part of the fourth century, another prominent church father, Lactantius (d. A.D. 330), reported that Emperor Galerius demanded Christians to make offerings of incense to pagan gods on various altars and perform sacrifices as well. When they refused, they were severely persecuted by imprisonment, torture, and often death (Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died, 15).

Although Christians were persecuted at times for rejecting Rome’s civil religious practices, their noncompliant behavior did not harm Christianity’s long-term influence. In time, their firm faith and conviction had profoundly positive effects on many aspects of life within the Roman world. Keith Hopkins, though an atheist, says it well: “Christianity subverted the whole priestly calendar of civic rituals and public festivals on which Roman rule in the provinces rested. Christianity was a revolutionary movement.”35
The uncompromising stance of the early Christians for three hundred years had other powerful effects, reminiscent of Jason and his fellow Christians who, in the middle of the first century in Thessalonica, were accused of having “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Thus by the mid-fourth century (one generation after Christianity became a legal religion) many pagan laws and practices were turned upside down by emperors who now were Christians. Constantine the Great outlawed branding the faces of criminals, banned crucifixion as a form of execution, and ordered speedy trials for the accused. His son Constantius ordered the segregation of male and female prisoners. Emperor Valentinian in A.D. 374 outlawed Rome’s widely accepted and legal practice of abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment. By the latter part of the fourth century Theodosius I outlawed the inhumanly cruel gladiator contests in the East, and in A.D. 404 Emperor Honorius outlawed them in the West. Many other wholesome changes, effected by the influence of Christians, could be cited.

CONCLUSION

Because American civil religious events are either deistic or increasingly polytheistic, may faithful, biblically minded Christians participate in them? Often, this question has not even been asked. The very nature of American civil religion, so closely associated with patriotism, makes the question itself seem almost un-American.

If the question is asked, sometimes American Christians show how little they understand the nature of American civil religion. When some Christians hear that it is not God-pleasing to participate in American civil religious exercises, they wonder: “What is wrong with Christians praying for our nation with individuals who are Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, or Jews? After all, they all are praying, are they not? How can that be wrong?”

Why do well-meaning Christians ask such questions? At least four reasons come to mind. First, Christians often have not been
taught that praying with non-Christians in civil religious activities is biblically prohibited. For instance, St. Paul cautioned the Corinthian Christians: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers . . . [and] what agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (2 Corinthians 6:14, 16).

Second, many Christians have not been adequately reminded that such interreligious prayers violate the First Commandment, which prohibits honoring gods of other religions (Exodus 20:3).

Third, many American Christians unfortunately have not been urged to follow the example of the early Christians, who refused to participate in ancient Rome’s civil religious activities, even though they were often persecuted by the Romans for their noncomplying stance. Keith Hopkins portrays an imaginary, but historically realistic, third-century exchange between Macarius (a Christian) and Celsus (a pagan skeptic). Celsus asks Macarius:

Why can’t you [Christians] compromise? he said. After all, different peoples all over the world call their Gods by different names . . . Couldn’t you just participate in our public festivals, for the sake of form . . . and perform public duties for the common good? Actually, I personally know of some quite respectable Christians who do just that, however much it goes against their highest ideals.

The compromising behavior by some weak Christians, described here by Celsus, unfortunately depicts many American Christians today, some of whom on various occasions participate in either deistic or polytheistic civil religious activities. Had the early Christians behaved similarly in connection with Rome’s civil religious customs, how long would Christianity have survived?

There is a fourth likely reason many Christians wonder why it is not God-pleasing to participate in American civil religious events with non-Christians. It pertains to their not having been catechized that they should not refer to non-Christian religions as “faith groups.” To ascribe the word “faith” to non-Christian religions unwittingly gives support to America’s current polytheistic civil
religion. To use such language, as noted earlier, implies that non-Christian religions are as valid and God-pleasing as Christianity. It overlooks the words of St. Peter: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Thus today’s Christians must break away from their culture’s way of speaking by no longer referring to non-Christian religions as “faith groups.” To say, for example, that Muslims belong to the “Islamic religion” rather than to the “Islamic faith” may not be judged politically correct in today’s American culture, but Christians need to remember that it is biblically and theologically correct.

Recently, some have argued for participation in civil religious activities because they are performed under civic, not ecclesiastical, auspices. Such activities, the contention runs, are outside the context of worship and therefore biblically permissible. This argument conveys a faulty understanding of the nature of American civil religion, which clearly involves worship. Webster’s dictionary defines worship as an activity in which people “adore or pay divine honors to a deity.” When civil religious events invoke an anonymous god-in-general (deism) or anonymous gods-in-general (polytheism), these are acts of worship, even in a civic setting. Further, the argument also overlooks the fact that when St. Paul told the Corinthians not to be unequally joined with unbelievers and when Moses told the Israelites they were not to revere gods of other religions, no distinction was made relative to the context or setting of such behavior. The context, civil or otherwise, was irrelevant.

People want to be liked and publicly accepted. Understandably, then, many Christians find it difficult to decline participation in civil religious events. To do so often means that others will see them as narrow-minded, or worse, even as bigoted. When such likely responses occur, Christians need to remember the words of St. Paul, Moses, and the stalwart behavior of the early Christians, along with the words of Jesus. He said: “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you” (Luke 6:26). Christians also need to recall

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that God does not want them to conform to this world (Romans 12:2). To be sure, they will often be disliked, even hated, for not conforming to the standards of the world, including the standards of America’s civil religion. Christ said: “You are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). Finally, contemporary Christians must not forget that God in time blessed the uncompromising behavior of the early Christians, as noted above with the positive changes that transpired after A.D. 313. Their behavior is an excellent model for faithful Christians to emulate today, even though the world makes such Christian behavior difficult, even as it did in the days of the Romans. May God bless all who seek to emulate their early Christian ancestors.

Notes
1. The Rev. Dr. Alvin J. Schmidt is professor emeritus of sociology at Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois. He holds an M.Div. from Concordia Theological Seminary and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology from the University of Nebraska.

2. Recently, Robert Kolb has argued that the English word religion is derived from the religere (to regard with awe), not religare (to bind together). However, he still says religion “indeed does function as that which binds together all aspects of life.” See his “Nothing But Christ Crucified: The Autobiography of a Cross-Cultural Communicator,” in The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century, ed. Alberto L. Garcia and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 53.


7. de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1:316.


9. See the essay in this book by Ken Schurb.
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11. This Latin phrase comes from Virgil’s Aeneid, 9:625, which reads: “Jupiter omnipotens, audacibus annue coeptis” (“Almighty Jupiter favor [my] audacious undertakings”), according to Gaillard Hunt, The Seal of the United States: How It Was Developed and Adopted (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, [1892] 1909), 20–21. Regarding this wording, Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall say that Charles Thompson (one of the committee members to design the Great Seal) “changed . . . annue, and imperative, to annuit, the third person singular form of the same verb in either the present tense of the perfect tense. In the motto Annuit Coeptis the subject of the verb must be supplied, and the translator must choose the tense . . . .” And they further say: “Hunt suggested that the missing subject was in effect the eye at the apex of the pyramid . . . and translated the motto—in the present tense—as ‘it (the Eye of Providence) is favorable to our undertakings.’” See Patterson and Dougall, The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1976), 89. Thus, the words annuit coeptis are commonly interpreted as God having favored the American undertaking, that is, the creation of a new nation, the United States of America.


23. Editor’s Note: Washington was initiated into Freemasonry at the age of 20 on 4 November 1752 and elevated to the order of Master Mason in 1753. It often comes as a surprise to many people to learn that the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area actually has two Washington monuments. The government’s 555-foot tribute to the first president is well-known, but just across the river in Alexandria, Virginia, there stands another tribute, the 333-foot George Washington Masonic National Memorial. This memorial, the only nationwide project of American Freemasonry, recognizes and honors Washington as the most important figure in American Freemasonry. His importance to contemporary Freemasons is summarized in this paragraph from a recent article in The Messenger, the newsletter of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial:

We as Master Masons are even further compelled to honor and to emulate our dear departed Brother. The ideals of Masonry, which attracted him to the craft, had a profound impact on his life. His exposure to Masonic philosophy helped frame his ideas of life, both personal and professional. He took its teachings seriously, its apron and trowel, all its symbolism and ritual. Eventually he would become the best known and respected Mason in America. He would bring to the Fraternity unparalleled dignity and prestige. (James Parrish Hodges, “Washington and Freemasonry,” The Messenger 9, no.1 [2003]: 4)


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33. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the ESV.

