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**Civil Religion vs. Spiritual Religion**

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In recent times, there has been a strong attack on Christians by many politicians, news media personnel, and various social media influencers. The framing of this attack has gone under the guise of "Christian Nationalism." The idea is that Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, equate God and country by referring to America as a "Christian country."

The truth is, there is a tremendous amount of confusion about this, even among Christians, that needs to be sorted out. If you mean, by "Christian country," that America is, or should be, governed by the Bible, then there are potentially some serious errors in play. America is not, and was never intended to be, a theocracy. If, on the other hand, you mean that the structure of society is based on the moral principles and values that the Bible teaches, then that would be a fair assessment.

For Christians, the essential distinction that must be made regards how to draw the line between the Christian faith itself, and how principles of the faith have affected the foundation and organization of American society. While there is a certain amount of overlap, the goals of the two are completely different – one focusing on spiritual outcomes and the other on civil outcomes. It is actually possible for a person to not be a Christian yet still believe in the foundational principles the country was founded upon.

For many people, the civil implications of Christian beliefs have actually become their religion – as opposed to the beliefs themselves. In this way, following these implications has become what is

sometimes referred to as America's civil religion. Sociologist Robert Bellah has referred to the belief that America is a "Christian country" as a civil religion. He defines it as "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things, and institutionalized in a collectivity." He also refers to it as nonsectarian – that is, it is not restricted to one religious sect or political party. As a civil religion, there is not a church or overtly religious dogma that is embraced. However, for its believers, the basic underlying principles do hold the power that a religion holds. It is a type of faith system that elevates the "American way" to something that is beyond mere political philosophy. Thus, it is very possible for a person to not be a Christian, while at the same time believe very strongly in the civil religion. The problem we run into is that many Christians do not know how to clearly make a distinction between the Christian faith and this civil religion.

**What Are the Principles That Make up America's Civil Religion?**

In order for a civil religion to exist, there must be some set of principles that can be clearly identified. And that is, in fact, the case. In America, these principles traditionally include:

- **The priority of the individual** - The individual, not the collective, holds the highest priority for societal order.
- **Individual liberty** - Based on the previous principle, the freedom of the individual is considered to hold a higher priority than the needs and desires of the collective.
- **Freedom of conscience** - People are free to believe what they want without any kind of coercion or interference from the government.

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- **Freedom of speech** - Based on the previous principle, people are free to express their beliefs without coercion or interference – as long as it does not somehow endanger or infringe the rights of others.
  - **Equal justice under the law** - The law is the ruler of the people, and every person, regardless of any life or social status, is equally subject to it.
  - **Due process** - Every person, regardless of societal status, is afforded due process based on the law.
  - **Equality of opportunity** - While equal outcomes are not guaranteed, every person has the right to attempt to achieve their highest aspirations.
  - **The existence of an objectively real human nature** - Human beings exist in an objectively real way, and society is structured to take that fact into account.
  - **The existence of objective truth** - Reality is structured in some objectively real way, and because of that, actual reality, fairness, truth, and right can be known. While there have been, and continue to be, violations of the truth, movement to achieve perfection based on truth is an aspirational goal that society should strive for.
- The principles listed here do not exhaust all of the possibilities, but they do lay out the basic foundation for the traditional value structure of American society. It is these beliefs and traditions that have created the environment that have allowed American society to flourish. And while these principles do not define the Christian faith, they do emerge from Christian beliefs.
- **Priority of the collective** - The good of society takes precedence over the individual.
  - **The "greater good"** - There are limits on individual liberty based on what society's leaders consider to be most important for the survival of the collective.
  - **Conformity to prevailing societal beliefs** - Since the collective has priority, individuals must conform to societal values and standards. Personal values and standards are subservient.
  - **Limitations on speech** - It is not permitted to use speech that is deemed by society to cause problems for the collective.
  - **Legal outcomes based on the "greater good"** - It is permissible to treat different people by different legal standards if it promotes the greater good of the collective.
  - **Due process limited by political and social circumstances** - It is permissible to deny people due process if it promotes the greater good of the collective.
  - **Equality of outcome (equity)** - It is deemed advantageous to the collective for all citizens to have the same economic and social status in society.
  - **No objectively real nature of man** - Human beings are capable of defining their own personal reality.
  - **Moral relativism** - There is no such thing as objective moral truth. Morality is defined by society in a way that is deemed to best benefit the collective.

### Non-traditional Beliefs Are Creeping in and Destroying the Society

In modern society, belief in, and adherence to, traditional values is

being broken down and replaced by a different set of values that are completely incompatible with America's traditional way of thinking and ordering society. These new beliefs are based on an entirely different worldview foundation. They include:

These non-traditional beliefs are contrary to traditional American societal norms, and are breaking society down. They are an expression of naturalistic

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beliefs, and are most commonly outwardly expressed as Socialism/Communism.

## How Christianity Fits into the Big Picture

So how are Christians to think about this topic? Should we fight to protect our civil religion? Should we look at it as something that is outside of our faith and thus simply ignore it? It seems that the best answer lies somewhere in between.

It is a fact that Christian beliefs form the basis of America's civil religion. It is, without a doubt, Christian principles that are the foundation for the values that American society was built upon.

That said, Christianity's purpose is different from the purpose of the civil religion. The purpose of the civil religion is to maintain order in society, and most Christians certainly believe that its principles are the best way of achieving that order. But while it is certainly crucial to support these principles, it is also important to realize that doing so is not the central purpose of God for human life as revealed in Scripture. The purpose of the Christian faith is to help people enter into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In truth, however, these two purposes do not contradict one another, and it is quite possible to promote both as we live out our lives in society. At the same

time, it is also essential to know how to make the right distinctions.

First, the Christian purpose has priority. That represents God's ultimate purpose for mankind. As such, Christians should make it their own priority to share with the people in the world how they can know a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This includes sharing the faith with people who adhere to the civil religion but who do not know Christ. While they obviously share Christian values as it relates to how to order society, and many will even self-identify as Christians, they are not Christians in a biblical sense.

At the same time, we also need to place a high value on, and work to maintain, the above mentioned traditional principles. We need to do that because they reflect the reality of the

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true nature of man, and allow us to order society in a way that promotes that reality based on biblical principles. The ideal is to promote both the spiritual and civil ideals to the highest degree possible.

That said, there have been, throughout history, many places where combining these ideals has not been possible. We have many examples where Christians have promoted the Christian priority in societies where biblical principles did *not* dominate civil society, and even in places where Christians have been actively persecuted because of their faith.

By understanding the principles, and keeping our priorities in the right place, it is definitely possible to not only point people to Christ, but to also promote a societal structure that reflects biblical values. Christians should do everything they can to understand the distinctions, and to promote Christian faith and values in every arena their lives intersect.