

Can America's 'Civil Religion' Still Unite The Country?

[Tom Gjelten](#) 8-Minute Listen

Andrew Harnik/Pool photo/Getty Images

America, unlike some countries, is not defined by a common ancestry, nor is it tied to an official faith tradition. But it does have a distinct identity and a quasi-religious foundation.

Americans are expected to hold their hands over their hearts when they recite the Pledge of Allegiance or stand for the national anthem. Young people are taught to regard the country's founders almost as saints. The "self-evident" truths listed in the Declaration of Independence and the key provisions of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights have acquired the status of scripture in the U.S. consciousness.

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More than 50 years ago, sociologist [Robert Bellah argued](#) that such facts of American life suggest that the country adheres to a nonsectarian "civil religion," which he defined as "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity."

For these beliefs and principles to give definition to a nation, scholars argue, they may need the power that a religion holds for its believers.

Characterizing them as a faith system elevates them beyond mere personal philosophy.

"I think the phrase 'civil religion' points to the way in which our political values have a dimension that goes beyond ourselves," says Philip Gorski, a professor of sociology and religious studies at Yale University and author of

American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present.

Acceptance of this uniquely American creed is seen as the key to one's identity as an American and distinguishes the United States from other countries.

"It is difficult to become German. It is difficult to become Swedish, because those identities are not ideas," says Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who [writes often on religion and politics](#). "Becoming American means you believe in the American idea, and at least in theory, that's open to any immigrant who's able to come here."

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In practice, some Americans have not been allowed full participation in society and political life.

"Because of the xenophobia Asian Americans are facing, because of the backlash against African American civil rights, we're seeing that this kind of citizenship, this intrinsic right to be in the U.S., to enjoy its freedoms, is not really for everyone," says Lynn Itagaki, a professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Missouri.

The strength and binding power of America's civil religion is clearly being put to a test.

Forming belief in the American idea

Just as young people are usually raised in the faith tradition of their parents, young Americans are schooled in the basics of the country's civil religion.

Boys who aspire to become Eagle Scouts, for example, must first earn the "Citizenship in the Nation" merit badge. As [part of the requirements](#), they must familiarize themselves with the Declaration of Independence, the

Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and they discuss the documents with a counselor.

Among other requirements, they must choose a speech of "national historical importance" and explain "how it applies to American citizens today." Discussion of the issue of America's unique identity is a key part of the merit badge course.

"Are we a country that's united by a nationality?" asks Cheryl Repetti, leading a recent merit badge class for Scouts at an outdoor classroom in Alexandria, Va. "Do we have hundreds of years of living together as a people, as a shared culture?"

Joe, a young man in the second row, raises his hand.

"I would say that the thing that really holds America together, it's our values," he says. "Kinda like freedom and, like, respect to everybody."

This is part of the civic education almost all young people in America learn, whether through a Scouting program or in their schools. Students from across the country visit Washington, D.C., in a typical year, as if on a pilgrimage, to see such hallowed buildings as the U.S. Capitol and get a firsthand look at the actual founding documents on display at the National Archives.

"I always tell my students that we started schools because we wanted children to understand our government," says Nicole Sarty, a fifth-grade teacher in Eagle, Idaho. "What was important about our government, and why America is an awesome country and why people want to come here."

Because of the pandemic, Sarty's students this year settled for a virtual visit to the nation's capital, including [a guided online tour](#) of the National Archives.

Among the topics Sarty has discussed with her students, she says, are the

opening words in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more Perfect Union...."

This year, she tied the discussion to current events.

"That goes back to everything that's happened with the pandemic and the riots," Sarty says. "We see things that aren't working right, but we're always striving to be a 'more perfect union.' We have great discussions, and it's exciting to hear 10- and 11- year-olds struggling with some of the same ideas that we've struggled with as a nation since the beginning."

Updating the scripture

Among the issues that teachers like Sarty have to confront is the flawed character of America's origin, when white Europeans violently displaced the native population.

"The U.S. is a white settler colonialist state," notes Itagaki. "It was founded that way."

Many of the founders were themselves slaveholders, including some who signed the Declaration of Independence, with its lofty language of all men being created equal. The original version of the U.S. Constitution stipulated that enslaved individuals should be counted in the census as only three-fifths of a free person.

Shadi Hamid, who is the son of immigrants from Egypt, nonetheless argues that the darker aspects of America's founding should not discredit the American idea.

"If we completely do away with key founding figures, and we start problematizing the founding documents, which are part of the American civic faith, then the American idea doesn't have a lot to go on," he says. "Foundations matter."

For Lynn Itagaki, who writes about what she calls "[civil racism](#)," the problem is less with the text of the founding documents than with their application. "The United States is sufficiently inclusive as a philosophy," she says. "In practice, it's obviously been exclusive and has pushed people out as not being deserving — or, in religious terms, not being faithful enough."

Itagaki notes that the American idea would be meaningful to more people if more recognition were given to some of its less familiar sources.

"The Iroquois nation's Great Law of Peace was influential in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence," she notes. "So we've got other thinkers, other texts, and I think we need to consider them in creating this civil religion that we talk about."

Similarly, Yale's Philip Gorski argues that the notion of an American scripture needs periodic updating to incorporate the voices of others alongside the nation's founders, such as Frederick Douglass, the social reformer Jane Addams, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I think about the American civil religion as an evolving tradition," Gorski says. "I sometimes liken it to a river whose banks grow wider over time and which is changed by the landscape that it flows through, instead of thinking about it as some kind of pristine spring that we have to return to again and again."

Debating religious language

The advocacy of a civil religion took a complicated turn in recent months as the American political idea became linked to Christian nationalism. Among those who invaded the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, claiming it as "our house," were many who said they were led by their Christian beliefs, even as members of the Capitol Police warned they were violating a "sacred" space.

One of the insurrection leaders, standing defiantly on the dais of the Senate

chamber, actually called on his fellow protesters to join him in prayer.

"Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" he shouted, as [recorded in a video](#) by a writer for *The New Yorker* magazine.

Among those upset by that scene was Myles Werntz, a theology professor at Abilene Christian University.

"When you have someone like you saw on Jan. 6 — someone who gets up into the Senate, declaring that the violence that is being done that day is being done in the name of God — that's when I think you find that religious language has gone amok."

The widespread display of Christian symbols on Jan. 6, in fact, has triggered a general backlash against religious nationalism in the country. Werntz fears that the notion of a civil religion for the country may suffer as a result. Some of the most eloquent apostles of the American idea, such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., spoke from a Christian tradition, Werntz notes.

"In his speeches, he frequently uses reference to Scripture, and he's not speaking specifically to Christians," Werntz says. "He's using these things as more basic moral instruction. My concern is that in trying to get rid of the Christian nationalist versions, the other things which might have some social benefit might get swept out as well."

At stake in this new consideration of a civil religion for the United States is whether this collection of beliefs and principles can still inspire the nation and hold it together.

The Scouts who gathered at a park in Virginia to work for their "Citizenship in the Nation" merit badge agreed among themselves that the work to put the American idea into practice is an ongoing process.

"We're kind of getting closer to that American dream," said Joe, in the second row. "We will never reach that dream perfectly. But I think it's a

history of getting closer and closer, from the American Revolution to the Civil War to the Cold War and then to now where we're having discussions about race, LGBTQ [rights], stuff like that. It's how can we get closer to that American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."