

Chapter 1

Topic 1 Theories of religion

Page 8

Activity: Media

American civil religion

Learning objectives

At the end of this activity you should be able to:

- Identify key features of American civil religion as proposed by Robert Bellah.
- Determine whether civil religion exists in America.
- Analyse whether civil religion is a form of idolatry.

A. In pairs, watch the clip below and answer the questions that follow.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWFz7p3yA88>

1. What is the first definition of religion given in the clip and why is this problematic?
 2. What is the broader definition of religion and what other belief systems would it include?
 3. Define and explain what is meant by nationalism.
 4. What did Bellah claim in 1967?
 5. What did Carolyn Marvin and David Ingles claim about nationalism?
 6. According to Bellah, what are the key features of civil religion?
 7. How is civil religion practised in America?
 8. In what ways did the first Europeans who came to America liken themselves to Hebrews?
 9. What is 'manifest destiny' and what did it mean to the settlers in America?
 10. Note down four ways in which sociologists claim the American Revolution was the origin of civil religion.
 11. What leadership roles in civil religion have been assumed by American presidents? Write down the specific examples given in the clip.
 12. According to Samuel Huntington, what are the three fundamental beliefs of the American Creed?
 13. List some examples of the evidence that supports Bellah's view of civil religion being a reality in America.
 14. What is the national shrine to civil religion shown in the clip? What does it contain?
 15. What examples are given of the saints of civil religion? How are these different to saints in other religions?
 16. List the 'heretics' and 'villains' of civil religion. What are their objections to civil religion?
 17. Who is 'civil religious' and who is less so, according to the clip?
 18. According to Bellah and others, which ideologies function like a religion?
 19. What is the definition of idolatry and what examples are there of idolatry in the clip?
 20. What evidence is given for civil religion being a form of idolatry?
- B. Using the information from the clip, write a summary paragraph to show how the existence of civil religion in America may be seen as a form of idolatry.