

Jack M. Holl. *The Religious Journey of Dwight D. Eisenhower: Duty, God, and Country*. Library of Religious Biography. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. 329pp. + 15pp. (back matter).

What American president was the first to join a church and be baptized *after* his inauguration? He also is the only president to date who wrote and delivered his own prayer at his inauguration. As president he supported successful efforts to add the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and to adopt “In God we trust” as the national motto of the United States. He likewise initiated the annual National Prayer Breakfast.

Obviously, anyone reading the title of the book being reviewed knows the answer is Dwight D. Eisenhower. His story stands out among American presidents not because he was religious, for most American presidents have professed some kind of religious opinions that they more or less sincerely believed. Rather, Eisenhower’s religious views are important for the way they both reflected and shaped religious discussion during the Cold War in the 1950s. Jack Holl has written a first-rate study of not only what Eisenhower said and did as president but also the background of how the president came to hold his religious opinions.

Eisenhower’s views and actions reflect an idea that sociologist Robert Bellah famously described as American civil religion.<sup>1</sup> This quasi-religious public faith entails religious ideas that may be endorsed by the state (such as freedom of religion), an idea of God, and certain “beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that reflect religious ideas. Although respectful of religion, American civil religion is not Christian. However, it sometimes derives concepts from Christianity such as the United States as a new Israel. Civil religion is the sentiment that allowed Martin Luther King Jr. in the March on Washington to tell the crowd, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” *creed* referring to the Declaration of Independence. Some may rightly view the idea of civil religion negatively as a façade or political ploy. Yet the religious ideas of Eisenhower demonstrate how such public faith can be sincere and even coherent, but still ultimately inadequate from a Christian point of view.

Holl covers Eisenhower’s entire life in order to provide the fullest possible background to his religious views. Perhaps the most interesting religious facet of his youth was his family’s links with the River Brethren, an offshoot of the Mennonites, and his parents’ adherence to a branch of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, both groups known for pacifist teachings. The irony of such a background for the Supreme Allied Commander in World War II is evident, but there is little evidence that his parents’ religious allegiances significantly affected him. Eisenhower’s parents allowed their children great liberty in religious matters, and the future president took advantage of that fact to devote little attention to religion.

World War II likely turned Eisenhower’s thoughts toward religion. The widespread destruction and death of war would lead almost anyone to consider religious ideas to try to make sense of the carnage, as it did with Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War. For Eisenhower, however, the appeal was even stronger as he opposed totalitarian ideological systems—first Nazism during the war and then

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<sup>1</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1–21.

communism during the Cold War. Religion for him became a component of democratic principles, as seen in a commonly quoted but misunderstood statement by Eisenhower: “Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.”<sup>2</sup> His point was that democracy requires a religious, theistic framework, which Christianity and Judaism provided in the American context. Religious faith is the bedrock of democratic ideals. Eisenhower’s religious gestures, such as his inaugural prayer or advocating the motto “In God we trust,” served to undergird the democratic traditions of the United States and the West in general.

Holl shows how Eisenhower applied his ideas politically if sometimes inconsistently—notably with the Civil Rights movement and nuclear proliferation, moral issues that challenged the president in working out how religion should influence public policy. Holl also devotes considerable discussion to the friendship of Eisenhower and Billy Graham. Their alliance seemed to be the very embodiment of civil religion and religious renewal in the 1950s, but the author shows that the interests of the president and the evangelist, while compatible, were not identical. There is a revealing discussion, for example, of how the Graham organization interviewed the former president in his retirement about his religious views and sought politely but vigorously to get Eisenhower to recount an evangelical conversion. He never did so.

The author has well described Dwight Eisenhower’s religious journey. If the discussion does not always put religion at the center of Eisenhower’s life, that has more to do with the subject than with the author. The work is a useful survey of Eisenhower’s religion with a relevant consideration of the engagement of religious belief and American politics.

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of this phrase and explanation of its background and meaning, see Patrick Henry, “‘And I Don’t Care What It Is’: The Tradition-History of a Civil Religion Proof-Text,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 35–49.