

May 26, 2013
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Should everyone put their hand on their chest, stand, and sing the national anthem while facing the flag at the sporting events of Christian schools?

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God. (*Exodus 20: 3-5*)

Clearly, we shouldn't worship images. The question is what it means to worship something. Roman Catholics have thought a lot about this because Protestants charge them with worshipping idols of saints. They distinguish between worship of God (*latría*) and veneration of statues of saints (*douλία*):

The impulse that leads us to worship God's perfection in itself will move us also to venerate the traces and bestowals of that perfection as it appears conspicuously in saintly men and women. Even to inanimate objects, which for one reason or another strikingly recall the excellence, majesty, love, or mercy of God, we naturally pay some measure of reverence. The goodness which these creatures possess by participation or association is a reflection of God's goodness; by honouring them in the proper way we offer tribute to the Giver of all good. He is the ultimate end of our worship in such cases as He is the source of the derived perfection which called it forth. But, as was intimated above, whenever the immediate object of our veneration is a creature of this sort, the mode of worship which we exhibit towards it is fundamentally different from the worship which belongs to God alone. *Latría*, as we have already said, is the name of this latter worship; and for the secondary kind, evoked by saints or angels, we use the term *douλία*. (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01151a.htm>)

This is all very elegant, but it's blowing smoke. When we see old ladies praying to a statue of St. Mary for the health of their grandchildren, that is idolatry, even though St. Mary is someone we should respect.



We Protestants feel very self-satisfied about images. Foolish Roman Catholics fall into idolatry, and the Jews were so foolish that the Bible had to give more attention to idolatry than to any other sin, but we are too modern for that to be a danger. We advanced Christians can go on to worry about "idols" like wealth and pride.

But what if a Martian came to Earth and attended a Protestant school's basketball game? Before the game, he would see a leader saying a short prayer to Jesus Christ. The people would bow their heads as they sat, and they would listen respectfully. Then the Martian would see the people stand up instead of just sitting. They would turn to face a

big piece of cloth with stripes on it on the wall high above them. They would put their hands on their hearts at that point--- not for the prayer--- and a beautiful young priestess would lead them in a song. Most of the participants would be too embarrassed to sing, but they would do everything else and they'd try to look worshipful. If the Martian could look into their hearts, he'd see many of them radiating sincere love towards the piece of cloth--- many more, in fact, than were radiating love towards anywhere at all during the prayer. The song would last somewhat longer than the prayer, and then the people would sit down and watch the game.



The Martian would conclude that like most humans throughout history, these people had a number of gods they worshipped. Among them would be Jesus Christ, who was important enough to warrant a short prayer. Another, clearly more important, would be the red and white cloth god. The Martian would decide the cloth god was a more important god for several reasons. First, the people stood up for him and turned towards his image. Second, more time was spent worshipping him. Third, he got a song sung by lots of people that proclaimed his glory, not just a spoken prayer. Fourth, more of the people were his devotees, as evidenced by the depth of their emotions. "Very interesting," the Martian would think. "These people do worship good gods, don't they, representing salvation, bravery, and freedom." Those gods don't exist literally, of course, but they do exist as representing sound virtues that we, too, in Mars respect.



What is worship? The simple answer is the one our Martian used: When people pay sincere respect to some abstract thing that has a physical representation in front of them, sing pious songs in its praise, devote their lives and property to it, and obey its commands, that is worship.

Wherefore **let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall**. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

Wherefore, my dearly beloved, **flee from idolatry**. I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say. (*I*

Corinthians 10:12-15)

“Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” We need to take great care lest we worship idols unawares. This doesn't just apply to metaphorical idols--- lust, greed, and so forth. *I Corinthians* clearly means real idols. They are close by, tempting us. We must flee.

In my first draft of this memo, I capitalized National Anthem and Flag. What else do we capitalize? God. The Bible. The Lord. We capitalize the President and the Supreme Court sometimes too, but that's different--- that's to help indicate which court we're talking about. But the national anthem and flag get capitalization when they shouldn't. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Even in writing an essay against idolatry, I fell into idolatry! May God forgive me. I hope He ordained my slip as a lesson to you, reader. It's easy to fall, but God forgives.

So what can we do, if we drop singing the national anthem at athletic events?

A. Just have a prayer before the game, no song.

This gets right to the game and avoids distraction from the prayer.

B. After the prayer, have a short, standard explanation of why we don't sing the national anthem.

This teaches people that Christians care about idolatry.

C. Sing a hymn before the game instead of the national anthem.

This preserves the custom of singing before a game, which gets the viewers enthused and ready to cheer. It glorifies God. It also distinguishes the Christian school from the secular school, showing how we are different.

D. Sing either the first and last verse of the Star Spangled Banner, or just the last verse.

The last verse of the Star Spangled Banner, though practically unknown, is much more acceptable because it praises God, not the flag. I wouldn't be surprised if Francis Scott Key wrote the last verse specifically for that reason, so his poem wouldn't be idolatrous. The last verse is

O, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand,
 Between their lov'd homes and the war's desolation;
 Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n-rescued land
 Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!
 Then conquer we must, when our cause is just,
 And this be our motto: "In God is our trust"
 And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!