

So where is the line?

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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This is an article about worship in traditions other than one's own, but it begins with CPE. Most clergy have benefitted from, or endured, at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) during their seminary years. It's a form of onsite practical education, most often in a hospital, in pastoral counseling. I don't know what the curriculum is like these days. When I took it, seminarians were introduced to so called "depth psychology" with enough tools for its use to become marginally helpful and possibly dangerous. For my own part, I was grateful for an undergraduate education in psychology, graduate education in organization development, and a thorough grounding in pastoral care through the Stephen Minister program.

But where does worship fit in? For some reason I was reflecting this morning on the experience and meaning of worship, and remembering experiences in other traditions. Like many others, I have had opportunities to observe worship in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic settings, feeling comfortable about offering my own prayers without joining in the worship being observed. At the same time, during my NYC years I wholeheartedly entered into worship with the congregation of Temple Emanu-El on many a Friday evening. But there is a line that cannot be crossed, and I recalled such a time when I was taking CPE.

Ours was a very mixed group from different traditions and religions. Seminarians took turns leading chapel services from their various traditions, with the expectation that all would join in. That worked out reasonably well until the day it was the turn of one whose religion seemed to center on nature as the physical embodiment of the idea of a god who may or may not exist in any other way. A pantheist I guess, although it was never clear to me that her religion had enough of a theology to have a name. The point is that, while I could reverently observe the worship service she led, I could not join in, and that was a problem because the liturgy she had prepared required participation from each person. I found a reason to be excused for important work elsewhere. It caused some hurt feelings.

Several of my fellow seminarians were quite upset at my rudeness, my unwillingness to show an adequate level of support for a fellow CPE student, and my narrow minded, stiff necked orthodoxy, a charge that more than a few friends would find ironically humorous. After all, what harm would there be? It raises an interesting question.

So here is the question. Where do you find the line that cannot be crossed?

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