

When calls for "respect" are really demands for something deeper

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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What's the difference between respect and allegiance?

Not much, if those howling over athlete protests of the national anthem are to be believed. If it's hard for you to spot the disrespect in someone sitting or kneeling quietly while someone else sings a song, remember that this isn't just any song. It is the national hymn to our nation's real god. So the players had better "respect" the flag—that is, they'd better do what the liturgy of allegiance dictates.

Christians, of course, should know better. We can and should respect many things. Our allegiance, however, is another matter.

No doubt some readers have little use for the distinction, at least not as applied to this news story. The flag demands respect *and* allegiance! So give it both or go away. Even [a peaceful protest of a massive injustice](#) won't get a hearing among those who see the flag as not a symbol of a fallible project of justice and freedom but a holy thing, an unassailable good in its own right.

This reaction isn't surprising. If you're in the national spotlight and you refuse to toe the nationalism line, some Americans are going to be angry. Colin Kaepernick *et al.* know this, of course; it's why their protest is such an effective way of leveraging their fame.

What's genuinely alarming is to see a church-run organization proactively take the side of anthem-respect absolutism. [This note from the school superintendent of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Camden, New Jersey](#), is remarkable. An excerpt:

Our schools are founded on the teaching of respect and honor; respect and honor for God, country and duly appointed authority.

It is expected that our administration and coaches as well as our athletes will show respect during prayer, pledges and the playing or singing of the National Anthem.

God, country, and authority. Prayer, pledges, and the national anthem. It's an old theme but so starkly put: faith and nation on equal footing, parallel items in the same serial list. All apparently worthy of allegiance, even if we just call it respect.

Then this:

We are not public institutions and free speech in all of its demonstrations, including protests, is not a guaranteed right.

Failure to do [sic] demonstrate appropriate respect will result in suspension from play (2 games) or dismissal from the team for subsequent offenses.

She's right as far as this goes; free speech rights don't mean the same thing at a parochial school as they do in the public square. And there is a whole complicated history of Catholic education's relationship with American patriotism, the double bind of the need to preserve the one identity while also publicly demonstrating the other. It's hard to blame church schools for treasuring their right to form students in their own way.

It's just so discouraging that this is what the Diocese of Camden wants to use that freedom for: to demand that students show allegiance to the state. Not to the church, whose values might or might not overlap with the state's in this area or that, but to the state itself: its anthem, its flag, its liturgy. With religious liberty like this, who needs state coercion?

It would hardly be radical to instead require students to respect the anthem in the plainer sense of "respect"—perhaps clarifying a range of acceptable practices—while stressing that allegiance is for God alone. After all, declining to stand for a song isn't exactly the height of disruptive spectacle. People do this in church all the time, and if they're not actively affirmed for it they're usually politely ignored.

Of course, that's just dusty old church. Who cares? This is football, the anthem, and the flag. [This is religion](#).