On the first Tuesday in October, the Folketing—the Danish Parliament—begins its session year.\(^1\) The Folketing’s first meeting is initiated with a series of traditional ceremonies. Some of them are part of the Constitution, while other traditions are part of the parliamentary protocol and the standing orders of the Folketing.

The opening traditions merge the celebration of the nation-state Denmark, the Folketing, the Danish democracy and the dominant religion in Denmark—the Danish Evangelical Lutheran church—in a series of rituals that exemplify a sacral church-state ritual. This chapter discusses how the nation-state draws on religious rituals and symbols, confirming a common conception of the nation and its connection with the state and the people living in Denmark. The parliamentary opening rituals are analysed as civil religious rituals that are specifically designed to support the political order of the state (Cristi 2001, 25). If civil religion, as the sociologist Marcela Cristi suggests, “attempts to force group identity and to legitimize an existing political order, by injecting a transcendental dimension or a religious gloss on the justification” (ibid., 3), it is relevant to examine the opening tradition as a component of Danish civil religion.

Rituals and symbols play an important role in the formation of the nation-state and political elites employ rituals and symbols to legitimate their authority: “Without rites and symbols, there are no nations,” writes American anthropologist David Kertzer in his book Ritual, Politics, and Power (Kertzer 1988, 179). Further, in order to understand political processes, it is essential to study how rituals and symbols operate in politics, how political actors intentionally and unintentionally manage rituals and symbols, and how these ritual and symbolic aspects relate to the material bases of political power.

\(^1\) Cf. the Constitution’s section 36, subsection 2 (Constitutional Act of Denmark 1953).
Cristi broadens the concept of civil religion in *From Civil to Political Religion* (2001). Whereas civil religion is usually seen as spontaneously created by society (cf. Bennett 1979, 114; Gentile 2005, 30), Cristi shows how civil religion is also deliberately created by the state. She introduces a continuum, for which Robert N. Bellah’s bottom-up model constitutes one end of the continuum and Rousseau’s top-down model constitutes the other end. Rousseau’s concept of civil religion implies that it is a state-formulated political idea, deliberately constructed to govern the people in a nation-state (Rousseau 1998, 129–138). Cristi designates this idea as a political resource (Cristi 2001, 4) or as a political religion: “Civil religion as understood by Rousseau is a political religion to be fixed by the state, for the state” (ibid., 138). Cristi’s empirical material, however, covers only one authoritarian state, drawing on an extensive study of civil religion in Pinochet’s Chile (1973–1990); but what happens when Rousseau’s top-down model of civil religion is used to analyse civil religion in a democratic state such as Denmark?

Italian historian Emilio Gentile also differentiates between the concepts of “political religion” and “civil religion”, where the former is “a form of the sacralisation of politics of an exclusive and integralist character” and the latter is “a form of sacralisation of a collective political entity” (Gentile 2005, 30). Political religions deny any form of coexistence with other political ideologies, whereas civil religion is not identified with the ideology of a particular political movement (*idem*).

The Danish case shows, contrary to Cristi’s case, how the concept of political religion and civil religion can be used to analyse public parliamentary rituals in a democratic nation-state. It is suggested that the opening rituals represent a civil religion more than a political religion, as they attempt to impose an exclusive group identity and to legitimise an existing political order by implementing a transcendental dimension or a religious touch on the Parliament’s opening ritual.

**National Identity**

The parliamentary opening rituals are closely connected with the construction of a Danish national identity. Three arguments underline this claim. The first argument maintains that the opening rituals make use of various national components, which constitute an understanding of the political elite’s cohesion with the Danish state and people as a distinct coherent people with their own state and government (Smith 2001,