

Collision at the Intersection of Church and State
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Matthew 22:15-22--A Question about Ultimate Authority: God or Caesar

Introduction:

Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we celebrate on Palm Sunday, Jesus goes to the Temple where the people and the Jewish religious leaders, come to hear him teach. He speaks in parables, and the Jewish leaders, who are loyal to Rome, become visibly nervous when his words challenge both their religious and political authority over the people. In this passage from Matthew 22 the Pharisees try to trick him with a question about who has ultimate authority, God or Caesar, but Jesus leaves them confounded.

In answer to the question put to him about paying taxes, Jesus says to give to Caesar the things that are his and to God the things that are Gods. But what are those things? How do we know the difference? And how do we make sense of the historic tension between religion and politics, especially in this congressional election year, in a country whose founders drew a clear line of separation in the First Amendment to the Constitution between religion and the authority of the state?

The Reading:

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.”

Collision at the Intersection of Church and State

In 1943 at the height of the patriotic fervor of World War II Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson wrote in his majority opinion that Jehovah’s Witness public school students cannot be required to salute the flag. In yesterday’s New York Times David French, a conservative writer, described Jackson’s opinion as “liberating words that echo in legal history.” “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation,” Jackson wrote, “it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”

Then why do so many Republican candidates and office-holders make such a naked appeal to evangelical Christian voters for their support by claiming to be good Christians? Why do they make commencement addresses at fundamentalist Christian colleges to emphasize their conservative Christian credentials? Why do they claim that the Democratic Party is full of secular liberals that have declared war on religion? Why do they give unqualified support to the state of Israel and the political decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem that evangelicals say will hasten the second coming of Jesus? What does evangelical hope for the apocalypse have to do with American foreign policy? What’s going on here? What does a candidate’s religion have to do with being elected president or senator or a member of congress?

Not since the election of 1960 has religion played such an important role in our national politics as it does today. While the First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” many American’s claim we are a “Christian nation,” and apparently are choosing candidates solely based on the candidates’ religious values.

How has a nation founded on the principle of the separation of church and state become so embroiled in what for some has become a religious test for public office, which is specifically prohibited by the Constitution? How have we come to a point in our history when a major presidential candidate can say, without serious challenge, “The notion of a rigid separation between church and state has no basis in either the text of the Constitution or the writings of our Founding Fathers?” A statement that is patently false.

What is the appropriate response to this collision between church and state whereby there is not even agreement about what religious freedom means or the appropriate role of the church in the public square? And what does our faith have to say about what happens when questions of religion intersect the world of politics?

I am descended from Swedish immigrants who settled in rural Minnesota in the late 19th Century. Unlike most Swedes, my people were Baptists. They were dissenters to the official Lutheran state church. In Sweden the Conventicle Act of 1726 prohibited gatherings for religious purposes outside of the state church. As a result the grassroots evangelical movement in Sweden in the 18th and 19th Centuries was suppressed by both the government and the state church, sending many pious people to jail simply for expressing religious beliefs that were not in accordance with the state-sanctioned religion. Baptist Swedes and other evangelicals persisted and met in private homes to read the Bible and pray together. While religious freedom was promised in the early 19th Century, it was slow in coming, and the dissenters continued to be persecuted. This led many to emigrate to America and its promise of religious freedom. At the turn of the 20th Century the county in Minnesota where my parents grew up had one of the highest concentrations of Swedish Baptists in the country, and they lived and worshipped freely. Those same Swedes created Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul, a school from which my father received his theology degree in 1930 and where one of my uncles taught psychology for many years and which today is a respected institution of higher learning.

I offer this historical sketch as one example of the promise of religious freedom and the value of church/state separation for the healthy growth of religious expression and diversity in our country. Our commitment to religious freedom has led to what is perhaps the most robust and diverse religious landscape of any nation in the world. For example, there are now twice as many Muslims in America than Episcopalians. I doubt that there is a faith tradition of any significance that is not represented somewhere in these United States. It is an attribute that is a direct result of our nation’s commitment to religious freedom as set forth in the first amendment to the Constitution, and it is one that we must value and protect, especially from those who claim that we are a “Christian nation.” I believe that those who wrap themselves in the mantle of evangelical Christianity in the context of electoral politics do not understand the fundamental value of our historic commitment to separation of church and state, and further that their continuing appeal to their narrow interpretation of religious freedom actually undermines that bedrock freedom for all Americans.

Even though many of the new American colonies were originally founded on the basis of a particular religious expression, the founders of our government, in their wisdom, sought to avoid the interconnections of government and religion that they had come from Europe to the

New World to escape. The mistake that many made, such as in the Puritan colony in Massachusetts in the early 1600's, was to create a new theocracy of their own choosing—John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill," for example—that was just as repressive as the state church of England that they had sought to escape. Yet the founders managed some 150 years later to create a Constitution devoid of religious language and a Bill of Rights that guaranteed free religious expression, including the freedom from religion.

James Madison—the father of the Constitution—recognized the value of the first amendment when he reflected in the 1820's, more than thirty years later: "The number, industry and morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of church and state."

This, of course, gives the lie to those in some current arenas of both religion and politics who claim that our government should be more friendly, if not more favorable, to Christianity, and further, it would seem...more favorable to their particular brand of Christianity. Now I grant that is my interpretation, but you can see where embarking upon this particular slippery slope can lead if those attitudes are embodied in our nation's laws and public policies. Even toleration is not sufficient to guarantee religious freedom, for toleration implies that my religion is better than your religion, but I will tolerate your religion, as long as you insist. But this places the minority—or the out of favor religions, including the lack of religion—in second class status. And that is not what the Constitution does. Once again, it clearly states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

So how did the United States become the first nation in the western world to place the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion in its founding legal document? One name stands out: our Baptist brother Roger Williams. In his recent and highly acclaimed book *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul* John Barry presents a detailed and compelling account of how Roger Williams, a highly educated and pious Puritan minister and founder of Providence and the Rhode Island colony and the First Baptist Church in America, laid the ground-work for the tradition of separation of church and state that we celebrate today. And he did so at the risk of his own life.

Williams was so godly that when he arrived in Massachusetts in 1631 the Boston Puritans asked him to be minister of their church, but he declined. Their church wasn't pure enough, he said. Ironically, he was later driven out of the Massachusetts colony, under threat of his life, because of his insistence on the separation of the religious and political spheres of public life. Here's what Barry says about Williams:

Williams became more than the first great champion of religious freedom. He was America's first rebel, America's first contradictor of authority. He lived at a time when nearly universal belief held that the authority of a government came from God. Williams rejected that position and insisted that government was entirely secular. He reasoned, therefore, that people were not subject to their government; the government was subject to them.

"We the People!"

You can hear echoes of Williams' principles in Abraham Lincoln's famous phrase from the Gettysburg Address more than 200 years later: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

These are hallowed principles that have stood the test of time, that are under assault today, and must be defended if we cherish the democracy that so many have fought to defend over the 240 years of our history.

Barry goes on to explain that Williams saw religious freedom as intimately connected to freedom itself. In other words, you cannot talk about human freedom in any ultimate sense unless that freedom includes freedom of conscience and freedom of belief, and as I have emphasized throughout my remarks, the freedom of non-belief. Any coercion of religious belief is ultimately a violation of human freedom. When you place this principle against the rhetoric of our current political culture that places such a high value on a particular form of Christianity, you see how far many have veered from the bedrock principle of church and state separation that our founders built into the Constitution.

Williams' conviction about church/state separation was fully formed before he left England for the colonies. He had been a protégé of Sir Edward Coke, the chief justice of England, who challenged King James' assertion—the same King James that has a Bible named after him—that the king was above the law. Coke is famous for establishing the Common Law concept that “a man's home is his castle,” that even the lowest commoner enjoyed the same liberties as the highest lord and was therefore free to live his life as he saw fit without interference from the state. Williams expanded this concept to a person's mind, that what a person believed or didn't believe was not subject to the authority of the state. According to John Barry, “Coke gave Williams a deep understanding of the law and of the realities of power, along with a deep reverence for individual liberty. All this was reflected in Williams' call for absolute religious liberty, without reservation.”

When Williams returned to England to receive a charter for the Rhode Island colony, which would be strictly secular and offer absolute religious freedom—what Williams called “soul liberty”—his thinking had a profound influence on such men as John Milton, Oliver Cromwell, and later John Locke. So 150 years before Thomas Jefferson, Williams had demanded a wall of separation between church and state, embedded it in the Rhode Island charter, and set in motion a principle, espoused later by Locke, that was eventually written into the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Barry says it was first, because it was foremost in the founders' minds. Together, he writes, “the freedoms of religion, of speech, of the press, of assembly and of expressing grievances against the government” that are linked in the First Amendment . . . represent the essentials of liberty—the right to think as one chooses and to express that thought.”

“All the tortured reasoning,” Barry concludes, “by those who say we are a Christian nation—all the quotes they produce testifying to the personal religiosity of the founders—cannot stand before the text of the Constitution. Nor can it stand before an explicit statement made in 1797 . . . when the Senate unanimously approved a treaty drafted under President George Washington and signed by President John Adams that stated, ‘The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion.’”

In Matthew 22, the Pharisees, whose authority over the people was being challenged by Jesus on a regular basis, sought to entrap him with a question that they thought would reveal his subversive intent. So they asked him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not.” Sensing their malice and devious intent, he turns the tables on them, as he often did. “Show me a coin that is used for the tax,” he says. “Whose head is on this?” “The emperor's,” they reply. “Then give Caesar the things that are his and to God the things that are God's.” They go away dumbfounded. He has outwitted them once again. How do you hang a man on such an enigmatic response? Except, one thing is clear. Jesus has articulated a principle that, I believe, is embedded in our concept of the separation of church and state, that there are indeed separate realms. Yes, government has its place, and it is appropriate to be responsible citizens by our support through

the taxes we pay to enable it to work. At the same time there is another, separate, realm, the realm of religious life, over which the government has no authority, that is, the things that are God's. And it is when we begin to mix the two, when government controls religion or when religion controls government that we begin to lose our freedom.

This is the legacy of Roger Williams who insisted on a strict wall of separation. "Everything in his experience had taught him," John Barry says, "that when one mixes religion and politics, one gets politics." "Williams (had) split open two fault lines that have riven America ever since," says Barry, "the line between, first, church and state and, second, free individuals and the state. On both issues he was, in the words of John Quincy Adams, 'altogether revolutionary.'"

When John Kennedy spoke to an assembly of skeptical Protestant ministers in Houston, Texas during the 1960 presidential campaign, it was to calm public fears—and I remember them clearly—that as the first Catholic president he would take his orders from the Vatican. In his remarks Kennedy portrayed a deep understanding of what Roger Williams and our founders had bequeathed to us:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute--where no Catholic prelate would tell (a Catholic) President how to act, no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote and where no (person) is denied public office merely because (of) their religion.

Let me be clear as I conclude that the separation of church and state does not mean that religion does not have a role in the public arena. Our many religious groups have played an historic role in the moral debates over abolition, child labor, and civil rights, a role we continue to play on tax policy, war and peace, treatment of the poor, women's choice, and marriage equality. In fact, I would say as responsible citizens and people of faith, it is our responsibility to bring the moral arguments shaped by our religious convictions to the public square. At the same time, our government is and must remain neutral on the issues of belief and non-belief. Our faith is a personal matter, protected by the First Amendment, as is our freedom to speak our conscience in the public arena. This to me is the real meaning of liberty, a right and a freedom that are best preserved by their exercise.

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