

A MISPLACED METAPHOR: CHURCH AND STATE

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Religion and politics are closely related in every nation. The relation is not new; it goes back many centuries. In Post-Reformation Europe, each state had to work out its own relation to whichever Christian church was dominant. The European people who first came to North America included many who were unhappy with Europe's arrangements. The history that ensued in the United States has been a peculiar one in which the relation of politics and religion is almost never directly addressed.

The phrase that everyone in this country knows is "wall of separation between church and state." Most people recognize that "wall of separation" is a figure of speech that can be misleading. Less obvious is the fact that "church and state" is also a figure of speech, a misleading metaphor that has never described either the British American colonies or the United States of America. Instead of a church and a state, the United States is comprised of many hundreds of religious groups, fifty states, and a federal government. The language of church and state is invoked as a blunt instrument to cut off discussion of important issues, such as the teaching of religion in state supported schools. What possible relevance has church and state to schools doing their proper job of studying religion as an important part of human experience?

The language of church and state does not prevent the seepage of religious ideology into the foreign policy of the United States and the high-handed use of religiosity in many local issues. An example is the outrageous performance of Roy Moore, until recently the chief judge in Alabama. For years, Moore has exploited the issue of posting the Ten Commandments in public places. He erected a 5000 pound monument at the court's entrance with (his version of) the Ten Commandments. His argument that this was not a question of "church" stood on good logical and historical grounds. The support that Moore receives - overwhelming in Alabama - points up some of the confusion about religion in the public life of the United States. Jerry Falwell had used an argument similar to Moore's whenever it was claimed that his moral majority organization violated the separation of church and state. Falwell quite logically insisted that his organization did not represent any church.

The usual defenders of the state in these cases are People for the American Way and the American Civil Liberties Union. Their answer seems to be to exclude religious thought and discourse from any part in public life, a stance that wins many court battles but does nothing for intelligent national debate. While left and right argue over posting the Ten Commandments, the policies of the United States government embody the religious mission of the country. When George W. Bush was rebuked by Muslims for using the word crusade, people finally noticed this terrible metaphor but they did not realize that Bush was simply speaking in the usual way that politicians speak in this country. (Dwight Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*, Billy James Hargis's *Christian Crusade*, Ronald Reagan's 1966 gubernatorial campaign called a moral crusade, John McCain's 2000 run for the presidential nomination as a crusade, etc.).

Wars are usually suffused with religious imagery and language; why else would you go out and kill people you don't know. When the elder Bush launched his war in January, 1991, he said: "It has everything to do with what religion embodies - good versus evil, right versus wrong, human

dignity versus tyranny and oppression.” The hyperbole was the temporary rhetoric of a limited war. But after Bush the younger launched project eternal war, such a contrast of good and evil becomes frighteningly apocalyptic. George W. Bush, in his first speech after Sept. 11, 2001 said: “Our responsibility to history is clear: to rid the world of evil.” Any nation that sets out to rid the world of evil has given itself a divine mission. Far from merely being exaggerated rhetoric of the moment, the conflict of good and evil hardened in Bush’s communications.

In 2001, a group of religious leaders met with Bush in the White House. They told him that his leadership at this time was part of God’s plan. Bush responded: “I accept the responsibility.” It is difficult to say which party spoke more outrageously, the ministers for discerning George W. Bush as God’s anointed or Bush for accepting the divine appointment. Certainly, religious leaders ought not to be feeding the inevitable tendency toward grandiose illusions on the part of political leaders. The ministers might have quoted Raymond Aron: “No prince is entitled to make his country the Christ among nations.”

When John Kennedy was asked by a group of religious leaders what he wished from them, he said: you should criticize me. Confucius said in answer to the question of how to serve a prince: “Tell him the truth even if it offends him.” A clever politician can channel the religious sentiments of the country behind his religiously spiked language. Laurence Moore notes that “close to a majority of Americans is willing to say that religion is the most important thing in life. Almost no one makes that claim about politicians, even smart politicians.”

The intellectual leaders of the country seem oblivious of how important religion is in the lives of ordinary people. Peter Berger has well characterized the United States as “a society of Indians ruled by an elite of Swedes.” I doubt that there will ever be a serious examination of religion in the public life of the United States so long as the language of church and state dominates the discussion. The full story of the history of the metaphor of church and state can be found in Philip Hamburger’s *Separation of Church and State*. Here are a few of the highlights of that study:

1. There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution or any state constitution about the separation of church and state. A “wall of separation between church and state” originated in a letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptists in 1802. The Baptists were complaining about being taxed to support Congregational ministers. Jefferson borrowed the image of a wall separating church and state from establishment ministers who used it accusingly against people they claimed were trying to remove religion from public life. It is notable that the Baptists did not publish Jefferson’s letter or ever cite it for support.
2. The language of church and state was popularized in the 1840s and 1850s by nativists fearful of the new immigrants. An attempt was made in 1876 to get a constitutional amendment. Hamburger writes: “With the concept of the separation of church and state, nativists could most clearly exclude Catholicism from the public schools without removing Protestantism. Protestants tended to assume that whereas Catholics acted as part of a church, Protestants acted in diverse sects as individuals.” The proposed amendment failed but various versions of the “Blaine amendment” were then adopted by states. The amendment prohibited financial aid to any

institution under the control of a religious denomination or any institution where religious doctrine is taught. However, the reading of the bible was excluded in the prohibition.

3. The nativist organization most supportive of church-state separation was the revised Ku Klux Klan. Founded in 1915, the Klan had five million members by 1926. The Catholic Church was its sworn enemy. In 1926, the *New York Times* editors wrote: "The American people have made up their minds for separation of church and state and they interpret such separation as meaning that no member of the Roman Catholic communion is eligible to the Presidency." Al Smith insisted that he believed in "an absolute separation of church and state" but to no avail. Later, John Kennedy would be more successful when he appeared before a national convention of ministers to profess that he believed in a country in which the separation of church and state was total.

4. The first clear use of the separation of church and state as the basis of a Supreme Court decision was in the *Everson* case in 1947. Subsidized busing to Catholic schools was allowed by the Court's decision. The decision written by Justice Hugo Black (whose connection to the Ku Klux Klan had caused a furor among Catholics when revealed in the 1930s) was something of a surprise. Black called it "a pyrrhic victory" for Catholics; the wall of separation was now firmly in place.

5. The great uproar in the 1960s over the Court's decision that mandated exclusion of the Lord's Prayer and bible reading from public schools cannot be understood without the history of what church and state had meant until then. "Church" had almost always meant Roman Catholic church. The legal solidifying of the wall of separation seemed to shore up the eroding position of a non-sectarian Protestant religiosity in the country. When the Court turned around and applied church-state to the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and bible reading, it was experienced as a betrayal. Had not church-state separation always protected the bible in state schools? One must admit that the large part of the country that has never accepted the 1960s rulings has most of history on its side.

Since the 1960s the Court has continued to elaborate in endlessly confused ways a metaphor that was dead when Jefferson first used it in 1802. The Court is not likely to find new language until the academic elite of the country drop their bias toward discussing religion in public life. The usual academic assumption is that religion is an obstacle to thinking and politically reactionary. At the moment when John Kennedy was professing belief in a country where the separation of church and state is total, Martin Luther King, Jr. was marshaling the religious forces of the country to fight the unjust racial laws of the nation. The Civil Rights movement was unimaginable without the influence of religion on politics.

One cannot deny that religion can function as a fuel to incendiary policies of attacking the state. But it is also true that when the issue is protest against the militarization of the country or draconian welfare laws, the religious voices are sometimes almost alone. The great statesman George Kennan wrote of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Letter on Peace in 1983: "This paper may fairly be described as the most profound and searching inquiry yet conducted by any responsible collective body into the relations of nuclear weaponry, and indeed of modern war in general, to moral philosophy, to politics and to the conscience of the national state."

The argument here is not that religion is always good - or even on balance mostly good - for politics. The point is that the United States of America strikes the rest of the world as being drenched in religiosity while the intellectual leaders of the country hide behind a mythical language of the separation of church and state. Thomas Jefferson, who used the phrase, borrowed from European origins, wrote elsewhere that “public authorities are not precluded from supporting instruction in religious opinions and duties.” Jefferson favored bringing “sectarian schools” into the university, integrating religious controversy into higher education. When will the United States, especially its universities, finally undertake a serious examination of religion?