

Sermon: "Life in a Christian Nation"

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When "church and state are separate, the effects are happy, and they do not at all interfere with each other: but where they have been confounded together, no tongue nor pen can fully describe the mischiefs that have ensued." Were these the words of some godless infidel? No, none other than the Rev. Isaac Backus, the most prominent Baptist minister in New England in his time, made this declaration. The year was 1793.

Is the United States a Christian nation? The Christian Right would have us believe so. They would have us believe that this country was founded as such and that the powers of secular humanism and other godless anti-religionists have successfully conspired ever since to rob God of his dominion over America. In fact, as historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote:

The founding fathers did not mention God in the Constitution, and the faithful often regarded our early presidents as insufficiently pious. George Washington was a nominal Anglican who rarely stayed for Communion. John Adams was a Unitarian, which Trinitarians abhorred as heresy. Thomas Jefferson, denounced as an atheist, was actually a deist who detested organized religion and who produced an expurgated version of the New Testament with the miracles eliminated. Jefferson and James Madison, a nominal Episcopalian, were the architects of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, which, in Jefferson's words, was "meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindu, and infidel of every denomination.

The Founding Fathers were not anti-religion. As Susan Jacoby, director of the Center for Inquiry, writes in "A Cockeyed Contention":

In fact --and it is a little-known fact today --devout evangelical Christians were among the strongest supporters of the separation between church and state that took shape in the formative years of the republic. In 1784, the revolutionary firebrand Patrick Henry introduced a bill in the Virginia General Assembly that would have assessed taxes on all citizens for the support of "teachers of the Christian religion." That proposal was defeated by a now-unlikely but then-familiar coalition of dissident evangelicals and Enlightenment rationalists, led by James Madison. The rationalists feared religious interference with government and the religious minorities feared government interference with religion.

Yet, despite the diversity of personal religious beliefs of our Founders, or perhaps because of it, the word "God" does not appear within the text of the Constitution of the United States. As Jon Meacham, author of "American Gospel" reminds us,

"After spending three-and-a-half months debating and negotiating about what should go into the document that would govern the land, the framers drafted a constitution that is secular."

So how is it, do you suppose, that today, sixty-five percent of Americans believe that the nation's founders intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation and 55% believe that the Constitution establishes a Christian nation? This according to the "State of the First Amendment 2007" national survey released Sept. 11 by the First Amendment Center.

The First Amendment Center has conducted the annual survey since 1997. This year's survey, being released to mark both annual Constitution Day (Sept. 17) activities and the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, also found:

Just 56% believe that the freedom to worship as one chooses extends to all religious groups, regardless of how extreme — down 16 points from 72% in 2000.

At the same time, the right to practice one's own religion was deemed "essential" or "important" by nearly all Americans (97 %.)

First Amendment Center Senior Scholar Charles Haynes comments:

While the survey shows Americans highly value religious freedom, a significant number support privileging the religion of the majority, especially in public schools. Four decades after the Supreme Court declared state-sponsored religious practices unconstitutional in public schools, 58% of respondents support teacher-led prayers and 43% favor school holiday programs that are entirely Christian. Moreover, 50% would allow schools to teach the Bible as a factual text in a history class.

The strong support for official recognition of the majority faith appears to be grounded in a belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, in spite of the fact that the Constitution nowhere mentions God or Christianity. Of course, people define "Christian nation" in various ways — ranging from a nation that reflects Christian values to a nation where the government favors the Christian faith. But almost one-third of respondents appear to believe that the religious views of the majority should rule: 28% would deny freedom to worship to any group that the majority considers 'extreme or on the fringe.'

The First Amendment says "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...."

One understanding of the separation of church and state is that the government will never engage in a religious war. This principle was firmly stated by George Washington in The Tripoli Treaty of 1797 between the US and the Barbary States, unanimously approved by the US Senate on June 10, 1797, and signed into law by Pres. John Adams. It specifically states that the US is NOT a Christian nation. Article 11 of the Treaty states:

As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion -- as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws,

religion or tranquility of Musselmen [Muslims] --and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

Remember the fear that the candidacy of John F. Kennedy engendered in so many otherwise liberal and tolerant Americans? The fear that, if elected, we would have a president who took direction from the Pope? In a 1960 address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Kennedy eloquently sought to allay these fears in a statement that now seems prescient in light of the religious tests that our presidential candidates must pass in order to be serious contenders. These are Kennedy's words:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute-- where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote-- where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference--and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.

The separation of church and state means that the government shall not control the practice of religion. It also means that the church shall not control the practice of government. It's a two-way street. Or a two-way roundabout.

It sickens me to see candidates for president being questioned on their beliefs about evolution. I cringe at the photo ops of politicians entering and leaving church; at the seemingly mandatory prayer breakfasts, the religious leaders called to the White House to advise the president. How I long for the day when a politician will stand up and say, "My religious beliefs are nobody's business." Or better yet, "I don't answer to any religious leader or religious body. My job is to serve the Constitution, not Jesus or even God."

The Religious Right has a hold on our politicians. I'm not speaking of mainstream Christians or even most conservative Christians, but of a minority of fundamentalists who seek to, in their view, "restore" the United States to Christ. Nor am I speaking of the Republican Party. There are plenty of Republicans who resist the call by the Religious Right to impose one narrow version of Christianity and so-called Christian values on the country. But it is undeniable that groups like Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, the author of the "Left Behind" series, Timothy La Hayes's American Coalition for Traditional Values, and Focus of the Family's Family Research Council have been successful beyond their dreams in establishing a narrow and oppressive form of Christian agenda on our public policy.

What can we, as liberal religionists, as people of faith who treasure religious freedom, do about it?

First of all, we can refuse to demonize the Religious Right and its followers. We can refuse to employ the language of fear and hate. Our UU principles include the practice of compassion and affirm the dignity and worth of everyone – not just the underdog, the oppressed, the powerless minority – but even the winners, the powerful, and those who would oppress us. We can seek to understand the worldview based on domination and intolerance and, by understanding its sources, oppose it effectively and with our integrity intact. A worldview that divides people into good and evil, saved and unsaved, deserving of God's love and deserving of eternal salvation.

This worldview is nothing new, especially to the Universalist strain in our collective history. It's a view that has cursed humanity from the earliest days of religion, and is not limited to certain Christians. It is a view founded on fear. Fear that there is not enough love, enough resources, enough freedom, enough God, to go around. Fear that if you are right, then I must be wrong – a risk that I cannot take in a chaotic and often mean world in which I struggle for control and understanding and, ultimately, justice. Fear of meaninglessness. If God is not on my side and against yours, if God will not grant me justice and dominion in the afterlife if not in this one, if God will not punish those who disagree with me, where is the meaning of my struggle?

Fear that if I do not ally myself with the powerful, I will be left behind, if not in the End Times, then at least in the competitive scramble to the top. Fear that if I do not follow the rules, if I question their fairness or rightness, I will be alone, different, vulnerable. Fear that if I look deep into myself, I will find a lost and hurting soul, no better than anyone else, someone powerless, someone seeking to fill my emptiness with material things. Someone trying to vicariously assuage my feelings of vulnerability by associating myself with the power of others, the power of the majority. Someone attempting to soothe my fears with the assurance that I am supported by the greatest power of all, the power of the Almighty.

Of course, a person with such fears will turn to the Religious Right for reassurance and a sense of purpose. The Religious Right has answers. Answers that are hard to find anywhere else.

Because those of us who have found other answers – answers like faith in the preciousness of this life, in the potential for goodness within us, in the value of reason and the wonder of diversity, the healing power of compassion, the ethic of generosity, of love – we tend to keep these answers to ourselves. In a cynical and bottom-line world, these answers too often sound naïve and even childish. Unrealistic.

We need to speak our truths more boldly. We need to speak them by embodying our principles in the way we live.

If we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we need to oppose the cheapening of life. We need to oppose the death penalty. We need to support the opportunity of every child to develop her potential. We need to forbid the use of torture.

If we promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations, we must reform our penal system, outlaw the use of automatic handguns, ensure a job and a living wage to all, provide affordable housing to the homeless and treatment to those who suffer from addiction or mental illness, forgive international debts and reform out drug laws.

If we believe in accepting one another and encouraging spiritual growth, we need to insist on religious tolerance and resist cultural and religious hegemony around the world and in our own nation.

If we value the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we must support public schools with fair and adequate funding, encourage stem cell research and the teaching of evolution, and restore the place of the arts and humanities in our schools.

If we affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, we must look at how our leaders are elected and the role of campaign financing; we must affirm the right of a woman to choose abortion and keep government out of private decisions about sexual behavior, contraception and marriage.

If we promote the goal of world community, we must restore the authority of the United Nations and the World Court; we must respect the democratic choices of other countries and reject pre-emptive wars, including the growing probability of a strike against Iran.

If we respect the interdependent web of all existence, we must work against the further weakening of anti-pollution regulations, take necessary steps to stop global warming and the extinction of species and support the availability of contraception to control world population.

Yes, we believe in the separation of church and state. But do we believe in a values-free government? Of course not. Can we truly expect any leader to check her religion at the door as she enters the halls of Congress, or sits in the Oval Office? A leader's values – his religious beliefs – will enter into his decisions – how could they not? We can hope that he or she will choose loyalty to the Constitution above any narrow religious loyalty, but we cannot ask that he or she make choices in a moral vacuum. We wouldn't want this even if it were possible. So what is it we ask of our leaders?

That their moral values – their religious values – oppress no one. That they practice an ethic of tolerance and humility. That they respect differences and that they see the humanity in all people and in all nations. That they hold human life sacred, that they treasure the beauty of the planet and protect it in its fragility. That they eschew superstition and embrace ambiguity, recognizing that complex problems require complex answers. That they wield power with caution, understanding that it is a gift that they hold in sacred trust.

We need to show the Religious Right and those who seek assurance in its rigid embrace that there is another way. That their longing for meaning and purpose cannot be

satisfied with easy answers – not for long, and not without great cost to the religious freedom that the Founding Fathers left to us as our national legacy. That is an unacceptable cost. We – we UUs and our fellow free religionists – are not the only ones paying that price. We must speak, and act, before it's too late. The whole world is depending on it.