

The Nature of Religion and Politics

Written by Rev. Jeff Cottingham
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Memorial Day Program Speaker.

Religion—faith in God—has been an integral part of this country from its founding. Accordingly, I watch with concern the directions many in this country seem to want to go, that we have not only strayed from the truth of God’s Word, but we have strayed as well from what the founders of this great country intended when it comes to church and state, along with religion and politics.

You see, as author Jon Meacham states regarding the first amendment and the “so-called” wall of separation between church and state, such a wall as Thomas Jefferson intended was to separate the church and the state, not religion from politics. There is a difference. The Rev. Roger Williams of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a strong advocate of this separation, but it was designed, as he said, to save the church from the state, not the state from the church. It was intended that our churches are free to worship without preference from the government and without control, insofar as it does not disturb the peace or the safety of society or individuals. A nativity scene in a public place hardly disturbs the peace.

Time and time again, the various founders, who were not always Christian by the way, saw the necessity for a religious component in public life. Religion (and more importantly the predominant religion: Christianity) was an essential foundation for this peoples’ moral conduct and for the American ideals concerning justice, decency, duty, and responsibility. It was George Washington who said, “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” John Adams remarked to Thomas Jefferson, “without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company, I mean Hell.” Perhaps most directly, Alexander Hamilton said “Does not [a national morality] require the aid of a generally received and divinely authoritative religion?” And George Washington began the practice of being sworn in on the Bible, the Word of God, and who added to the end of it all, the words, “so help me God.” As we see the prayers offered in general assemblies, references to God in the various state and national charters and ceremonies, a constant insistence that faith must be at the core of the individual American’s existence, and the continual direction of faith in Christ in our leaders throughout our history, to then argue against a role for faith in politics is a futile effort.

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So why is it then, that we have such a debate on both sides over how we interpret the First Amendment? Certainly if Congress can make no law respecting the establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof, then to prohibit Christian symbols in public places is to do just that: prohibit the free exercise of our faith. But I don't think that this is the real issue in the end. Yes, I believe that Christians are a persecuted bunch in today's America. Yes, I believe that those who want to eliminate such things from public places completely misunderstand the role of faith and politics. And yes, I believe that you can mix religion and politics, while keeping the church and the state separate.



To say that this country was founded on Christian principles is no understatement. The very day we gather for today: Memorial Day—is a day to remember those who apply a selfless understanding for the greater good of what it means to be free. Those who have given their lives to protect those founding principles are living out the very ideals our founding Fathers intended. They are protecting those ideals and preserving that which is at the foundation of our charter as a republic: That our creator has endowed (us) “with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It is our duty to pay respect to those who have taken Jesus’ own words to heart, whether intentionally or not. Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Certainly, those who have given their lives to protect the freedoms and ideals this country was founded on have done just that: they have given their lives for the sake of others. Their sacrifice has paved the way for us to worship and proclaim what is of first importance.

So today we honor their sacrifice. We remember that some gave all so that all could live in this great land. It is the very least we can do. It is also the very first thing that we ought to do. The Patriot Guard Riders have a motto that states, “the nation that forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten.” Let us never be that nation. Let us also remember that we, all of us, have these rights simply because of God our creator, who created us, who owns us, and who still sustains us and grants those founding principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That is a proper way to mix religion and politics. May God bless this great land: the United States of America.