

Religious Liberty – or – Religious Monopoly?

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Matthew 22:15-22

In his insightful book, “American Gospel,” celebrated author Jon Meacham offers insights about the role of religion in America, particularly from the Founders of our nation. There is little question that by establishing religious liberty in the United States Constitution, our Founders showed perhaps their greatest brilliance. Meacham argues, “The story of how the founders believed in faith and freedom, and grappled with faith and freedom, has a particular resonance for our era. Given the world in which they lived – a time of divisive arguments about God and politics – the Founders repay close attention, for their time is like our time, and they found a way to honor religion’s place in the life of the nation while giving people the freedom to believe as they wish.”

America’s early years were “shaped by evangelical fervor and ambitious clergy, anxious politicians and determined secularists. Some Christians wanted to impose their beliefs on the rest of the country; other equally committed believers thought faith should steer clear of public life. In the fulcrum stood the brilliant but fallible political leadership of a new nation. The Founding Fathers struggled to assign religion its proper place in civil society – and they succeeded. Our best chance of summoning what Abraham Lincoln called ‘the better angels of our nation’ may lie in recovering the sense and spirit of the Founding era and its leaders, for they emerged from a time of trial with an understanding of religion and politics that, while imperfect, averted the worst experiences of other nations. In that history lies our hope.” (pp. 6-7, Random House)

It is wrong to assume that America today has diverse opinions and beliefs but that in colonial America everyone was an orthodox Christian. You might recall that Jefferson did not believe in the divinity of Christ or in his ability to perform miracles, and Jefferson actually took a copy of the Gospels, and with scissors and glue, he cut out all the sections about Jesus in which he did not believe, revealing only the humanity of Jesus. You can actually purchase a copy of “Jefferson’s Bible.” Jefferson and Franklin were Deists, who believed in God and in Jesus as the greatest teacher of all history, but not the Son of God. John Adams was a Unitarian. Samuel Adams, a fierce advocate of independence, was a Puritan who looked askance at other faiths. “When Lincoln was running for the House of Representatives from Illinois, he was charged with being ‘a scoffer at religion,’ ...because he belonged to no church. During the campaign, Lincoln attended a sermon delivered by his opponent in the House race, Rev. Peter Cartwright, a Methodist evangelist. At a dramatic moment in his performance, Cartright said, ‘All who do not wish to go to hell will stand.’ Only Lincoln kept his seat. ‘May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where are you going?’, the glowering minister asked. Lincoln responded, ‘I am going to Congress.’” (13)

Our Founders “had ample opportunity to use Christian imagery and language in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, but did not.” (22)

“...the Founders came to believe that religion, for all its faults, was an essential foundation for a people’s moral conduct and for American ideas about justice, decency, duty and responsibility. George Washington said, ‘And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.’ (28) “Our minds and hearts, as Jefferson wrote, are free to believe anything or nothing at all—and it is our duty to protect and perpetuate this sacred culture of freedom... The principles of God-given life and God-given human rights are the two wings on which the nation rose – and on which it still depends.” (31)

John Leland, a Baptist evangelist who worked with Jefferson and Madison to secure religious freedom in Virginia, stated, “Let every person speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him doing so.” (32)

“As the Founding Fathers gathered for the inaugural session of the Continental Congress on September 6, 1774, in Philadelphia... Thomas Cushing moved that the delegates begin with a prayer. John Jay and John Rutledge objected, “because we were so divided in religious sentiments...we could not join in the same act of worship.” (65)

Until we lived in St. Louis, I was unaware that under Spanish and French administrations, prior to the Louisiana Purchase, Missouri had an official state religion in which only Catholicism was recognized. Protestants were not allowed to cross the Mississippi.

The Spanish Commandant General Gayoso stated on Jan. 1, 1798, “No preacher of any religion but the Catholic shall be allowed in (Missouri).” And “Freedom of conscience is not to be extended beyond the first generation: the children of immigrants must be Catholics.”

Within a few years of the construction of the early Baptist church, the city of St. Louis widened the street in front of the church, essentially making the building inaccessible. The city refused to reimburse the church because it did not recognize a Baptist church as a legal entity! When a hail storm broke the windows of the church, the city eagerly condemned the building. It was hard-going for Protestants in early Missouri.

When it came time for the Baptists to found a colony in America, instead of establishing a state church, the Baptists decided that liberty of conscience was to be the ruling principle of Rhode Island, separating church from state and giving freedom to all minorities to practice their faith. It was a unique experiment that was to define American governance.

I recall speaking with Baptists living in a Mormon community in Southwest Wyoming who were shocked to learn that their school-age children were being marched twice a week to the Mormon church to receive religion instruction. Theirs were the only non-Mormons in their classes.

A Member of a Baptist family died while their pastor was away. The family asked the neighboring Methodist pastor if he could officiate. The young Methodist pastor had never before faced such a request, so he wired his Bishop: "Can I bury a Baptist?" The Bishop promptly responded, "Sure, bury all the Baptists you can!"

In my childhood, my father contributed to an organization called, "Americans United for the Separation of Church and State." When I became old enough to differentiate my politics, his concern for that separation seemed out of step with the times. It had the overtone of separating politics from religion.

I no longer feel that way. Because the Baptists were dominant in my small town, almost one out of three persons, I recall only one public school teacher who ever offered a prayer in her classroom. It was frowned upon, not because we didn't believe in prayer, but because we didn't believe in government-mandated prayers for the public schools. That was typical of Baptists then. Sadly, in many places, that has changed.

I was in a conversation recently with several retired school teachers and they were talking about how often a student came up to their desk, perhaps between classes, and asked for prayer. The teachers happily obliged, as indeed they should. That is voluntary prayer – even requested prayer. Prayer is all through the public schools – and it is appropriate in the schools. Anyone can pray at any time. Students can organize prayer cells if they desire. The only kind of prayer that is unconstitutional is government-written, government-mandated prayer. I would hope every Baptist child would be removed from a public school that attempted to mandate prayer. Prayer doesn't mean a thing unless it is voluntary, and unless it comes from the person. When a teacher tries to force prayer upon students, it violates the sanctity of prayer. Forced prayer is an oxymoron – there is no such thing. If you're forced, you're not praying!

Where we get confused is that the Constitution of our nation wisely separates church and state. It does not, however, separate politics from religion. Politics comes from the Greek word, "politikos" and simply means the work of the citizens. Someone said it's the process by which groups of people make decisions. Taken in this light, then a faith that does not address inequality, that does not address poverty, that does not address the rights of minorities, that does not address injustice, is a silly faith, an inward faith, a faith not worth having.

That is precisely the reason I came to First Baptist Church of Kansas City, 45 years ago. I could not support a faith that did not address the issue of Civil Rights. I could no longer support a faith that did not address the huge inequalities of American society in the 1960's. I came because I was told that Mal Haughey, our pastor at the time, was said to hold the morning newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. His preaching spoke to me then – and I could never return to a faith imprisoned to a private piety.

But there is one other area where we get confused because there is an important distinction between partisanship and politics. The church must never be partisan. You will never hear me endorse a candidate running for office or endorse one political party over another – not from the pulpit – not in my public role as a pastor. Indeed, the problem that is making the United States Congress dysfunctional is the triumph of partisanship over politics. Politics is

tending to the business of the American public. Partisanship is when one's allegiance to a political party is higher than one's allegiance to what is good for the American public. We've seen too many recent examples of politicians doing what is good for their party when it is to the harm of the nation.

Once Jesus was challenged by someone asking if it was lawful for Jews to pay taxes to Rome. And Jesus answered, "Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a Roman denarius. Then Jesus said to them, "Whose head is on this, and whose title?" They answered, "The Emperor's." and Jesus said, "Then give to the emperor the things that are his and to God the things that are God's." There is a way to be obedient to the State while maintaining an even deeper allegiance to God.

But it wasn't always easy. During World War II, our government declared that Japanese citizens living on the west coast were a threat to national security, even though they posed no recognizable threat. German-Americans, for example, did not have their property confiscated nor were they herded into remote internment camps. One of my predecessors at Seattle First Baptist church, the Rev. Harold Jensen, stood up against the internment of the Japanese and illegally organized members of his congregation to secretly store the possessions of their Japanese neighbors while they were away. It was considered aiding and abetting the enemy. Dr. Jensen recognized the injustice of the government's actions and he refused to obey it.

I served a church in Pennsylvania that offered sanctuary to illegal Salvadoran refugees because the church recognized that their lives were in danger if deported by our government. Along with other pastors, I was arrested in Philadelphia for blocking the entrance to the Federal building as we protested the continuance of the war in El Salvador which we saw as immoral. I was so proud this summer of my friend and fellow Baptist pastor, the Rev. Bobbie Love of Second Baptist Church of Olathe who went to Washington DC to commit an act of civil disobedience for which he was arrested – because he believes that our broken immigration laws are hurting the innocent children and grandchildren of illegal immigrants. And he stood up and said, "Enough!"

If Martin Luther King, Jr. hadn't defied the laws of our land, we might still have racial segregation in the South today. King one time preached at his beloved home church in Atlanta, "If I die in this cause, let it be said at my funeral, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others... I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the Vietnam War. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. Say that I was a drum major for righteousness.'" (p. 442, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, Stephen B. Oats)

In defending religious liberty, Baptist Francis Wayland said in the early days of America, "in matters which concern our relations to God, the state has no jurisdiction. It has no right to take cognizance of our duties to God. Hence, it is guilty of wrong, if it prohibit or annoy any form of Religion, if it favor one more than another, if it restrict the exercise of any form of devotion, either public or private." (223)

The Birmingham, Michigan City Commission placed churches on land use permits, and in order for the church to house the homeless on a rotating basis among the churches, we had to submit a formal request each year to the City Commission. All the churches in town followed this procedure. Finally, it fell to the Baptists to declare that we would no longer ask permission of the city to follow the teachings of Jesus, who declared, “For I was a stranger, and you took me in.” (MT 25:35) We weren’t sure whether they would arrest us, but the city finally backed down and no church in the city ever again had to ask permission to house the homeless in its facilities.

Wayland said, “Here, then, is the peculiar glory of the Baptists. While they have suffered persecution at the hands of almost all the dominant sects, ...their garments have never been defiled by any violation of the rights of conscience. What Roger Williams claimed for himself, he as freely granted to others. He tells us, ‘ I desire not that liberty to myself which I would not freely and impartially weigh out to all the consciences of the world beside.’”

Voices like these should be reverberating through the halls of this church. We do not want or desire a religious monopoly: we seek religious liberty. Let us tell the world, “You do not know the Baptists: for We Are a Freedom-Loving People!” Amen.