

Church and State in America Today — A Culture of Life and Death



While we were observing the first day of *Pesah*, many churches in America participated in what was known as “Justice Sunday.” On large television screens, these congregations watched a filmed message from religious and political leaders who alleged that certain of President Bush’s judicial nominees were being denied confirmation because they were “people of faith,” and the opponents of these nominees were branded as individuals “against people of faith.”

Congregations were urged to take action in this perceived

faithbased conflict. The broadcast was carried over Christian television and radio stations, and on the Internet. An estimated fifty-three million people had access to it.

This development highlights a growing phenomenon over the last thirty years. Beginning with the highly visible Moral Majority of Jerry Falwell, right wing evangelical and fundamentalist churches have become a potent political force in America, advancing an agenda on public policy that would transform into law the moral and doctrinaire tenets of their faith.

In recent years, they have been joined by an increasingly politically vocal Catholic Church, particularly on issues pertaining to abortion and homosexuality. The unabashed religious rhetoric of the current president has emboldened this movement. They believe that his campaign promised the vigorous advocacy of their agenda. They believe that they delivered the votes that elected him. Now they are calling on him and his party to make good on their promises.

I believe that this is a development of great concern for all Americans, and for American Jews in particular. The agenda of these religious leaders diminishes the separation of church and state that has been fundamental to our culture. It undermines the soil in which the American Jewish community has thrived.

To appreciate how the political climate has changed in America, think back to the presidential election of 1960. John F. Kennedy was only the second Catholic in the history of the republic to be nominated for the presidency. His campaign was dogged by the innuendo that if elected, Kennedy would “take orders” from the Pope in Rome, and would be untrustworthy to exercise his office in the best interests of the country. The problem became so acute that Kennedy decided to appear before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in September of 1960 to address these issues head-on.

In his remarks, Kennedy made his position very clear. “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. . . . I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me. Whatever issue may come before me as President, if I should be elected, on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject, I will make my decision in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates. . . . But if the time should ever come — and I do not concede any conflict to be remotely possible — when my office would require me to either violate my

conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope that any conscientious public servant would do likewise.”

How naive and anachronistic these remarks seem. Today, political leaders appear on the pulpits of churches and at gatherings of the “faithful” eager to outdo each other in promising to advance the agenda of one denomination or another. Ministers endorse candidates from the pulpit despite the fact that this is clearly illegal under the laws granting tax-exempt status to religious institutions. Now someone might ask, don’t we all bring to public issues our own moral values, and don’t many of us derive our values from our religion? What’s wrong with that? What’s the difference here?

I think the difference is this. If we come to the public forum, and engage in vigorous debate about whether a policy is in the national interest, and our values are schooled by our faith or lack of it, that is appropriate. But if we come to the political forum with dictates that must be implemented because they are tenets of our faith and religious doctrines, that is inappropriate. All government imposes limits on the governed. But we have the right to expect that these limits are for the general public welfare, and in the public interest; that the values made into law are shared by a majority of the nation. But on these matters, a majority is not enough. Our nation is based on the principle that religious and moral pluralism is to be respected. We believe that the dogma of one faith cannot legitimately be imposed upon a diverse nation. The Constitution and the courts are the guarantors of freedom and liberty, even of the minority. When a religiously zealous group lobbies beyond the legislative and executive branches and seeks to undermine the fundamentals of the Constitution and the courts, it is simply not the American way. It is antithetical to what makes this country the unique bastion of freedom that it is.

I know that within the American Jewish community there are those who advocate alliances with the “Christian Right” and their agenda because, after all, they support Israel. I believe that this is extremely short-sighted. It is the separation of church and state that is under attack by the Religious Right. And it is that separation that has made this a land of unparalleled opportunity and security for American Jews and every other minority. How can we have alliances with those who seek to undermine the very essence of what makes this country what it is? When a religious or political leader speaks of America as a “Christian nation,” just what role do we think they anticipate for us, and every other non-Christian, in the land they would remake if they could?

We must never surrender our American birthright lest our very freedom crumble after it.

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Church and State in America Today — A Culture of Life and Death (continued)

In his remarks in Houston, Kennedy spoke of the issues that people of all faiths should be able to agree on, and work together to accomplish, because these values are shared by all systems of morality. He pleaded for “The hungry children I saw in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctors’ bills, the families forced to give up their farms — an America with too many slums and too few schools.” These he said are the “real issues.”

Forty five years later, they still are. The president is wont to invoke his advocacy of a “Culture of Life.” But the term, as he uses it, has a very limited scope. It is usually invoked to refer to the so-called rights of the so-called “unborn,” ergo denying or severely restricting the right of women to have an abortion, as is legal today. It refers to limiting stem-cell research. It refers to intruding on “end of life” issues such as the unseemly presidential and Congressional involvement in the Terry Schiavo case.

Now these are legitimate social and moral issues, and they are worthy of discussion; however, the positions are mired in doctrine and religious belief. Moreover, they are tangential to the real “Culture of Life” that is needed in America today. Look about the American landscape today. It often seems that we are in the throes of a “culture of death” and not a “Culture of Life.” Here in Philadelphia, we have been horrified by cases of teens ganging up on teenage “friends,” to lure them away and murder them. Children die from random bullets on the city streets and playing with their parents’ guns at home. Still, we cannot get gun control passed despite the fact that most Americans favor it. In Florida, Governor Bush has signed a law that virtually gives every citizen the right to “shoot first and ask questions later.” We started a war that has created wanton death and destruction, and have avoided sending our military to places where we could stop on-going death and destruction.

The list is endless. American values today are not about life, but about gaining and protecting privilege. We worship economic growth no matter whose hand the President has to hold to get it. Our political leaders are giving aid and comfort to those who want to foment a religious war in America between believers and non-believers, and between believers and believers.

Is this a “Culture of Life?” Is this the best we can do? While we flee to suburbs that are increasingly far from the inner city, living in our gated communities, sending our kids to private schools, indulging ourselves with every luxury imaginable, America is still a nation where the effects of privation fester and overflow. Our service men and women, and thousands of Iraqis die in a war we chose to start, and we go about our daily business and conduct our lavish celebrations as if nothing was happening. America rests on an unstable moral foundation, a seething cauldron. It is the legitimately religious imperative of all people of faith that this foundation be shored up with opportunity, righteousness and justice. In January 1941, President Franklin

Delano Roosevelt gave his famous “Four Freedoms” speech. In it, he articulated four primary freedoms that every just society needs: Freedom of speech and expression; Freedom to worship God in his own way; Freedom from want; Freedom from fear.”

Our political — and for believers, our religious — agenda should be the renewed implementation of these four freedoms. Every initiative should be tested against it. We need freedom of speech and expression — the ability to speak our beliefs and opinions without having doctrine imposed upon us; the ability to love whom we choose and to live our private lives without the state’s coercive interference.

We need freedom to worship God, each in his or her own way, to live by the principles we hold sacred, and to allow others to do the same without fear that because one religious group has the votes, another can be balloted into submission. We need freedom from want — a job, food and shelter, education for our children, health care for all, a protected childhood and a secure old age. We need freedom from fear — the ability to walk down the street and sit in our home. As the prophet said, “and none shall make him afraid.” And as was further said, “Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

This is the “Culture of Life” worthy of America. This is the religious mission that all Americans, believers and non-believers, ought to be able to agree upon and work toward.

These issues create unity and build a better America for all, consistent with God’s demands and the mandate of the founding fathers.

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