

THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS

To what extent can the state ensure the pursuit of social, cultural and religious autonomy does not pull a nation apart?

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THE RISE of the so-called 'religious right' in America has been put under much public scrutiny in recent times. Who are they? The 'religious right' is not defined by a particular Christian denomination or ideological profile. Many of these religious groups have no institutional or formal identification; but all have a powerful commitment to a particularistic vision of being 'Christian' and the sense that it must play a role in their national destiny. The notion of political enfranchisement is further enhanced by the fact that the President himself seems to espouse a particular form of Christian evangelism and the emergence of influential Jewish neo-conservative groups with close economic and political ties to the administration.

Historically, close collaboration between religious groups and political organisations in the United States is nothing new. Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority (the political organisation he founded) played a leading role in galvanising support for Ronald Reagan's successful presidential campaign. Under the Reagan administration, judicial nominees began to re-introduce government support for religious education and other religiously

motivated activities. Similarly, throughout the nineties, political fervor swung back to secularists when the Supreme Court rejected any government endorsement of religious symbolism. Similarly, the ideological cleansing of McCarthyism during the fifties usefully evoked religious imagery in an attempt to discredit those accused of being involved in 'Un-American' activities. The major difference today from what has gone on in the past is that post-Sept 11, politics in the US has become a far more accommodating place for the religious right.

First off, let's be clear about one thing: America is a country where religion, at least for a large segment of its population, is taken seriously (at last count, almost 90% of Americans professed belief in one form of religion or another). There are an enormous number of religious groups – almost 1,500 as one estimate makes out – and these figures are increasing. This places enormous pressure on the state to ensure that the boundary between state and religion is maintained. Yet, over and above any other country in the West, America has been explicit in its stand on the place of religion in public life – as it has been guaranteed by the Federal Constitution.

In an ironic take on the issue, some scholars have gone on to proclaim that America's national religion is its 'faith' in the constitution. Others argue that the idea of the division between church and state was written very clearly, with Christianity and its institutional manifestations in European history in mind; and how best to contend with the problems which arose through that association – such as the longstanding political struggle between church and state. The constantly changing forms of what constitutes as 'religion' makes the current constitutional decree for a clear separation between church and state increasingly ambiguous.

Assuming then that the state is to act as arbitrator over and above religious life, it must espouse a kind of neutrality. Is the assumption of state 'neutrality' over and between religions valid? Can 'neutrality' be defined satisfactorily, and 'who' ought to decide? Can believers themselves accept the hegemony of the state over and above that of faith? Would that not compromise the pre-eminent position of religion(s)? After all, a fundamental aspect of some forms of religious devotion is the acceptance of the pre-eminent status of faith. And perhaps, most importantly, what meaningful

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distinction can one draw from 'religious' as opposed to 'non-religious' practices, and why should one take precedence over the other?

This historical context is still of great importance today when one thinks about the relationship between the state and religion in America. A significant part of it stems from trying to manage the traditional distinction between church and state. The need for the state to clearly identify something regarded as 'religious' as opposed to otherwise often leads to a number of difficult and often, intractable problems. One landmark occasion during the late 1800s was when the Supreme Court ruled against the Mormons on the issue of polygamy (Reynolds vs the US Government in 1878). For the Mormons, polygamy was a part of their religious practice and, therefore, under the freedom of religion clause sought the rights to practise their religion freely, and to have it ratified by law. Under federal law, however, the practice of polygamy was prohibited. The Supreme Court responded by asserting that religious conduct (as opposed to religious belief) is acceptable only if it does not contravene federal law – therefore creating a distinction between the freedom of belief and the freedom of practice.


A more recent example would be the incarceration of citizens such as Muhammad Ali in the late sixties to the recent conviction of a US soldier during the current Iraqi debacle – both imprisoned because they refused military

service in the name of religion. Another important landmark in the struggle between the state and religion was Lemon vs. Kurtzman in 1971 whereby the Supreme Court ruled that all government decisions be motivated by a secular purpose, to have secular effects and to ensure that the state will not involve itself with religious institutions (which later came to be known as the 'Lemon Test'). This effectively meant for the prohibition of school prayer and Bible readings in public schools; as well as the removal of Christmas decorations from the public square.

Writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, early American social thinkers like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson recognised that generating a document that bound different communities together, with their different beliefs and practices, would always require a great deal of compromise. After all, governing the entirety of social, political, religious and economic life of a nation under a single founding philosophy could never hope to be all things to all men. But what made the idea a relative success was that these different communities were willing to accept these compromises (in certain states, the greater concern was to ensure no single denomination acquired political power – which in Europe was the basis for the attendant persecution of politically disadvantaged religious communities) in order to be part of the fledgling state. Historians point out that these compromises were made more palatable because of the prevailing

circumstances facing many of these communities at the time – the avoidance of persecution, economic concerns and political malfeasance – required a pragmatic solution.

Also many of the more politically involved communities and citizens shared cultural similarities and, hence, the language of politics bore some common resemblances. Though specific denominational symbolism was rejected, there was a general acceptance of the centrality of Christian practices in public life. And although significant portions of the early Americans were dedicated Christians, the concern with maintaining the communal practices meant that the maintenance of a constitutional guarantee was widely supported. An overbearing state, similar to what many of these communities were fleeing from, was something considered inimical to their well-being.

The idea of the division between state and religion was seen as a practical solution to an ongoing political problem. But a difficult question remains today – the diversity of religion is seen as the conclusion of communities or individuals choosing their own form of faith; in the pursuit of their own social, political and cultural, as well as religious autonomy, to what extent can the state ensure the pursuit of social, cultural and religious autonomy does not pull the nation apart? 

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