

Religion and Politics
S.T.A.R. Reflection
January 23, 2022

DISCLAIMER: *As a rule, S.T.A.R. reflections are spiritually uplifting and inspirational. This one will be an exception to that rule, for it is more in the spirit of angry prophetic rant than mellow mysticism. When I began, I intended to wind up in a happy place, but I found I simply could not get there from here. Please join me anyway for this brief trip on the via negativa—the way of casting off!*

At the time I first thought of this topic, I had the current melding of fundamentalism and right-wing politics in mind. Fundamentalist groups have traded votes and other types of political action for the governmental power and wealth to support their institutions and causes. This has come at a cost to both religious and political institutions. It has made government an enforcer of certain religious dogmas, has taken freedoms from groups not aligned with the fundamentalists, and has diverted public money to private coffers. It has caused a shift away from democracy toward theocracy.

On the other hand, religious institutions have simplified their belief systems to a few unnuanced issues that they want government to force on others, and the quest for political power has corrupted some of their leaders. This movement is sometimes called Christian Nationalism, an ideology that fuses Christian and American identities and promotes Christianity as the reigning religion under a red, white, and blue cross. The marriage of religion and politics has been good for neither institution.

As I considered this topic further, I realized that the issue is much, much bigger and much older and much more pervasive than a current event. As I will argue in a minute, religion and politics have historically been extensions of one another for several thousand years.

To narrow the topic to more manageable proportions, I want to stick to one religion, Christianity. We can start with Christ, whose three-year career as an itinerant healer and preacher involved political protest against the Roman Empire. Whether Jesus' ministry was mainly devoted to achieving social justice or not, there is no question that he was crucified for treason. At the urging of Jewish High Priests and

king, the Romans killed Jesus for being “King of the Jews.” Thus, the mixing of Christian religion and politics began with Jesus himself.

Attacks on the Christians went on. The leaders were crucified and the Christians driven to worship underground in Catacombs to avoid persecution. Christians did gain some toleration in the later Empire, but it was not until the Emperor Constantine that Christianity was truly accepted.

The future of Christianity was assured when Constantine converted to Christianity. The Temples of the old Roman Gods were left to decline or began to be converted to new Christian churches. As you might expect the old religions didn’t disappear all at once, but they were increasingly driven underground by Christian persecution. Even the persecution and killing in the Roman arena continued to some extent under the Christians.

I once took an undergraduate course in Church History at a little Catholic college in North Carolina. The instructor said it would not be much different from a European history course, and I think he was right. The history of the Catholic church from the earliest days to the reformation was one of politics and principalities. The pope was as much a political king as a spiritual leader, perhaps more so.

This remained unchanged by the reformation. Luther’s call to reform and then to separate from the Catholic church was moved forward as much by the political efforts of German princes to end the political influence of the Pope as it was by spiritual zeal. Certainly, the establishment of the Anglican church was more a move toward political independence for England from the pope than it was a spiritual endeavor. There was almost no light between church and state in any of these situations on either side of the divide.

Which brings us to America. Let’s skip the coming of the priests with the conquistadores and look at the pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in December 1620. They were a group of radical Puritans called Brownists or Separatists who wanted to break from the Anglican Church. They came to America to practice their religion beyond the reach of the Anglicans. They are credited with writing the Mayflower Compact. It was the first framework of democratic government written and enacted in the territory that is now the United States. There were settlers aboard their ship, the

Mayflower, who were not Separatists, and the Pilgrims wanted to be sure they had no say in the new government they were about to form. The Mayflower Compact, which gave power to its signers and kept it from those not allowed to sign, was an agreement to create a government. As it turned out, this government was a theocracy—a marriage of church and state.

Anglicanism was the official church in several of the Southern colonies. It lost that status with the coming of the Revolutionary War. This is another instance of politics driving religion in this country.

Pennsylvania, guided by William Penn, was an exception to the rule we have seen fall into place. Penn set up his Holy Experiment in religious and political freedom, exactly as he thought right. He advertised for settlers, explaining that Pennsylvania would be democratic, tolerant of all religions, and a place where people from all walks of life would be welcome. Many responded. Penn arrived himself in 1682, and called a colonial assembly to discuss his draft constitution, the “Frame of Government.” After some amendments, it was soon adopted. The Frame included such personal rights as property, suffrage, consumer protection, education, and religious freedom, as well as a criminal code, and provision for the poor, all overseen by a Council, and a House of Representatives. Pennsylvania drew many Quakers who understood the importance of separating church and state.

This idea of religion as separate from government was also embraced by Thomas Jefferson and was written into the first amendment of the US Constitution. Writing to a Baptist group, Jefferson contended: “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.”

Despite this attempt to write the separation of religion and state into the constitution, these two institutions continued to influence each other. For example,

during the civil war, Baptists, Methodists, and other denominations split to reflect the politics of their geographic homes.

And there is now the issue we began with—the melding of fundamentalism and right-wing political groups or religious nationalism.

The fusion of a religious group with a political entity has resulted in a severely limited theology. Christian nationalist dogmas form a short list indeed: antiabortion, homophobia, pro-public prayer, pro-guns, pro-Christmas, and pro-public funding of religious schools. Gone are the complex and pervasive theological constructs of the Catholic Summa Theologica, the inspiring paradoxes of mysticism, the intellectual curiosity of the Jesus Seminar, the joy and life of Creation Theology, and all the teachings and example of Jesus himself. Indeed, there is little interest in God and almost none in the Holy Spirit.

Christian Nationalism is a religion of externals. The goal is to make others behave as the true believers believe they should. It is a movement with little internalized belief or values. Its prime interest is to have its schools funded and its few beliefs codified into law. When all is said and done, there is very little religion in this religion.

The political side of the church-state fusion suffers similar constriction. The business of the state is only to make abortion illegal, to severely constrain non-heterosexuals and to constrain heterosexuals, to mandate public prayer, to save Christmas, to save guns, and to take funding away from public education and give it to private religious schools. Issues like climate change, public health, international relations, education, infrastructure maintenance, judicial integrity, economic inequality, and constitutional law command little of its attention. In short, it has become a government that acts only for a few of its many constituents and only in limited and predictable and trivial ways. Its purpose is to keep one small set of politicians in office. Corruption and criminality may flourish in such a state; justice probably will not.

On an individual level, people who hold a belief so strongly that they are ready to impose it on others will find it very difficult to let that belief go. Spiritual growth demands that we replace one idea with another or at least a better version of it. So, a belief

system that nudges a person to seek the power to lock everyone into his personal religious beliefs may lack the flexibility to grow in its breadth and depth.

Similarly, a government dependent on individuals who embrace its tenets with religious zeal will find it difficult to do anything that does not further those tenets. It too loses flexibility as well as the capacity to change in the face of new conditions.

When Jesus went into the desert at the beginning of His ministry, Satan presented him with three temptations. For one of them, “The devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said, ‘I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It’s been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours.’” Jesus rejected this temptation of political power, saying “You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”ⁱ This is a command Jesus’ followers should observe. Perhaps we might also want to reflect on the notion that all political dominion was entrusted to the devil!

When religion and government are not separate, neither fulfills its potential. In both cases, the result is failure so significant that it brings moral and spiritual wrong in its wake.

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ⁱ Quoted from the *Common English Bible*, Luke 4:5-8