

Render Unto Caesar

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Abstract. The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution sets forth a principle commonly known as “separation of church and state.” As obvious as the principle may seem to those who have grown up in its shadow, it is not without critics. There are many, for example, who regard the separation as not only impractical and ill-conceived, but contrary to their fundamental religious precepts. This paper explores the basis of the principle, the merits of the approach, and the concerns of those who fear that something is lost in the process.

Separation of Church and State

The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Partially because the language is so terse, the amendment has been interpreted in various and sundry ways. Although the vast majority of citizens are Christians, there is no official state religion. When the system works in the way in which it is envisioned by many of its proponents, people are free to worship as they please (or not): without having to meet in secrecy, without intrusive regulation or control, and without fear of repercussions or reprisals from the powers that be. By the same token, the first amendment is generally read in such a way as to prohibit governmental action or policy that would provide preferential treatment for individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of religious conviction or affiliation. In short, the amendment drives a legislative wedge between secular and sacred, between holy and profane, and between piety and politics.

As obvious and innocuous as the principle may seem to some, it is not without critics: even in the United States. Many belong to religious groups who regard the separation as not only impractical, but contrary to their fundamental religious precepts.

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Render unto Caesar

Jesus was asked whether he and his fellow Jews, living under a forced and oppressive Roman occupation, should pay taxes to Rome. It was a trick question, but an instructive one nonetheless. If he answered that they should not pay taxes, his reply would constitute treason against Rome. If he answered that they should pay, his reply could be taken as an endorsement of the Roman rule and thus infidelity to Israel. Sensing the trap, Jesus asked whose image was engraved on the coins. The answer, as he well knew, was that of Caesar. Thus the stage was set for his oft-quoted proclamation:

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. (Matthew 22:21, KJV; cf. Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25)

Although sometimes ironically misinterpreted as an endorsement of the principle of separation of church and state, Jesus' response is better seen as a clever and insightful way of returning the question – along with responsibility for an answer – to the ones who would have ensnared him in this crown of thorns.

Two thousand years later, people are still asking much the same question. How do I balance civic responsibilities, professional responsibilities, social commitments, and secular interests on the one hand, with sacred duties, religious convictions, and spiritual practices on the other? Which things properly belong to Caesar and which to God? Where should we draw the line between church and state? It may seem to some as though Jesus dodged this difficult and controversial question, leaving his disciples and billions of Christians to come without clear guidance or direction. Such, however, is a short-sighted assessment. We do not have to look far to find Jesus' answer. An individual described variously in the gospels as a scribe or lawyer asked him which is the greatest of all commandments. Jesus replied:

The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. (Mark 12:29-30, KJV; cf. Matthew 22:37, Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12, 11:13, 13:3, 30:6, Joshua 22:5, and 1 Kings 11:2)

With God in the picture, there is not much room for Caesar. As if to emphasize the point, Jesus cautioned his disciples that:

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24, KJV; cf. Luke 16:13)

The Fall of Rome²

In 410 A.D., Alaric and his band of Goths accomplished what no other Roman adversary ever had: they breached the walls of Rome itself, sacking the city, raping the women, taking whatever they wanted and setting fire to the rest. The Roman citizens were

² Portions of this section are indebted to Ronald H. Nash (ed.), *Ideas of History, Vol. I* (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1969).

dismayed, disheartened, and bewildered. How could this have happened? How could people they regarded as uncivilized barbarians defeat what had once been the greatest military force of its era? There were many who pointed the finger of blame at Christianity. What had once been a small persecuted sect within Judaism had been elevated to the status of a state religion. Under the Emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 to 337, a Roman who wished to hold office – indeed, even one who wished to serve in the military – had to become, at least in name, a Christian. Rome, they charged, had become too soft: turning the other cheek when they should have been thrusting the other spear. Worse, they argued, Rome had abandoned its traditional gods and goddesses. Was it any wonder that those divinities had failed to protect the city from the marauders?

The individual known to history as St. Augustine penned his monumental treatise, *The City of God*, as a complex rejoinder to those who blamed Christianity for the fall of Rome. Written over a period of time between 413 and 426, the treatise begins with direct responses to the charges leveled by those who favored a return to the gods and goddesses of old. Rome, Augustine pointed out, had been subject to various catastrophes while supposedly under their protection. Moreover, as was abundantly clear from the catalogue of vices that he compiled, Rome had not exactly become a poster child for Christian piety or virtue. The problem, he argued, was not that Rome had become too Christian, but rather that it had not become Christian enough. As the work progressed and Augustine continued to reflect not only on the history of Rome, but on the history of the human race in general, he developed a theory of time, a theory of history, a theory of human nature, a theory of social organization, and a theory concerning the proper relationship between church and state. Rather than focusing on the merits of one social, political, or economic system vs. another (e.g. Rome vs. Israel or the United States vs. Iraq), Augustine chose to mark a distinction between two basic options: what he called the *City of God* vs. the *City of Man*. In Book XIV he explained:

Two cities have been formed by two loves, the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. (XIV, 28)

Whether Goths or Romans, we must each declare our true allegiance. We must choose on a daily basis – through thought, word, and deed – whether we wish to be citizens of a celestial city (the City of God) or residents of a terrestrial one (the City of Man). For Augustine, as for Jesus, there was no middle ground. Trying to straddle the divide, with one foot in one city and one in the other, was not a viable option. The promise of his God was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. His service was an all or nothing affair.

Back to the Present

Given the background described in the preceding paragraphs, it is no wonder that a sizeable number of contemporary Christians, including ones in the United States, regard any legislation that would keep religion (meaning *their* religion, of course) out of government – or out of programs such as public schools that depend on taxes collected in coins bearing the likenesses of modern-day Caesars – as un-Christian, un-Godly, and unholy. In an intriguing application of first amendment principles, they argue that a forced separation between church and state violates their religious freedom. While most

objections of this sort have come from right wing Christian groups, many religions would agree with the general structure of the argument, provided of course that one substitutes their teachings for those of Christianity. Confronted by the obvious impasse, looking down the barrel of an argument that threatened to undo the religious freedom principle on which it is based, most Americans have agreed to an uneasy truce. It is, to be sure, a form of religious tolerance, but tolerance of only the most base and basic kind: we agree to live and let live, not because we find value in alternative religious traditions or spiritual practices, but because we fear the imposition of other “foreign” traditions and practices more than we object to the fact that our own beliefs and values have not been adopted by the entire society.

One Nation under God?

A second group of critics charge that the American system is a sham and that the Christians who object to a supposed separation of church and state simply have not taken a cold, hard, honest look at the political and social realities. Our currency, while bearing the portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and other political leaders, is emblazoned with the phrase “In God we trust”. The words “one nation, under God” were added to the pledge of allegiance during the Cold War to distinguish the righteous citizens of America from the godless infidels of Russia and China. Repeated objections have been raised by those who do not believe in God, as well as by those who believe that God works at a more individual or universal level, conferring no special status on the citizens of one country rather than those of another.

Even so, millions of schoolchildren repeat the phrase on a daily basis, generally oblivious to both controversy and content. The federal district court for California and neighboring states ruled that requiring public school students to recite the pledge in its current form violates first amendment freedoms. It could have been a landmark case, but when it reached the Supreme Court last year, substantive issues took a back seat to formal jurisprudence and election year politics. Because the lawyer who challenged the practice on behalf of his daughter did not have full or sole custody, the court ruled that he did not have the requisite legal standing to file suit (thereby invalidating all previous rulings in the matter).

Public school calendars incorporate Christian and sometimes Jewish holidays, but typically ignore those of Islam and other less prevalent traditions. Student in a school choir may be taught Christian hymns or carols for their annual Christmas concert, even in districts where the administration chooses to bill the event as a Holiday or Winter Concert. In short, the second group of critics charge, America is a Judeo-Christian nation in secular dress: the so-called principle of separation of church and state serves only to keep others out and enforce the monolithic thinking (including the religious and social values) of those who already wield the power.

What are we teaching our children?

A third group of critics demands a hearing as well. While they may or may not champion one particular religious tradition as more desirable than that of another, what these critics

share in common is a concern that the first amendment – interpreted as an impermeable barrier between church and state – leads to a society that lacks a unifying or common narrative. When religion is exorcised from the public schools, we raise generation after generation of citizens with no clear sense concerning the foundations of moral values, ethical behavior, or interpersonal conduct. As a result, many Americans struggle with issues of worth and identity, lacking a clear sense of either self or community.

Elementary Education majors in my Philosophy of Religion class last summer unanimously agreed that they would try to teach their future charges to treat others as they themselves wish to be treated (the so-called Golden Rule of Christianity).³ They were somewhat surprised, extremely interested, and perhaps even gratified at a personal level to learn that similar principles had been developed in pre-Christian Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other traditions. Learning the religious, contextual, and cultural bases of the principle, however, did not change their mind about one fundamental tenet: as public school teachers it would be manifestly inappropriate for them to share any of the information they had learned in my class with any of their students (even in response to direct questions). If a child noticed a similarity between their rules of classroom behavior and a Sunday School lesson, for example, they indicated that they might simply smile and move on, saying nothing rather than becoming entangled in what they perceived to be a sticky wicket. While some suggested that they might tell the child the topic is one that would be better discussed with his or her parents, other students were quick to advise against that strategy. All you will get, they counseled, is a headache and a student who will not take “No” for an answer, incessantly asking “Why? Why? Why?” or “Why not? Why not? Why not?”

Rather than encouraging dialogue and open discussion, these teachers-to-be had been taught to shut down any line of inquiry that might be construed as a breach of the principle of separation of church and state. Is it any wonder that our children are misguided, confused, frustrated, or cynical? Over time, they learn to simply play the game: they learn not to ask, not to question, and not to think. The responsibility for spiritually-based moral instruction falls to the parents who may or may not take the child to religious services once or twice a week. It is better than nothing, but we delude ourselves if we believe those Sunday School or Sabbath lessons carry the same weight with our children as the things they are – or are not – taught in their “real” school.

I still remember my daughter’s first day of Kindergarten. She tugged on my sleeve so that I might bend down to let her whisper in my ear. I could tell by the gleam in her eye that it was a matter of some importance: an insight or revelation that would forever define this rite of passage for both father and daughter. I am not sure what I expected from my precocious five-year-old, but what I heard was this heart-stopping assessment: “Now that I have a *real* teacher, Daddy, I won’t need you or Mommy to teach me anything ever again.” Fortunately, as she matured, my daughter learned that many of the most valuable lessons life has to offer do not occur within the confines of a classroom.

³ Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27.

Where do we go from here?

Elsewhere I have argued that the principle of separation of church and state, as exemplified and practiced by the United States, is but one of three approaches that have been developed to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. Each, I have argued, has something to teach us, but none comes with a trouble-free guarantee. If we are to meet the spiritual needs of a complex global society, we will have to draw upon and learn lessons from all three models, paying careful attention to weaknesses and vulnerabilities as well as strengths and insights.

Criticisms of the preceding pages notwithstanding, from the United States we learn that politics and religion are poor bedfellows. There is no room in a global society for preferential treatment or consideration of one religion *vs.* others. This does not mean that a global society should be blind toward (or ignore) religion. In fact, quite to the contrary, it may take concerted effort to create a global environment in which all religions may flourish. Perhaps less intuitively obvious, and potentially more controversial, these same expectations must be applied to global economic relations. No culture, and by extension, no set of religious or spiritual practices, should be forced into extinction by economic practice or policy that places that culture at a *de facto* disadvantage.

As the history of the United States demonstrates, we will have to be on our guard to insure that the pluralism of a global community does not marginalize religious and spiritual values, that morality is not reduced to the lowest common economic denominator, and that people do not exchange their sense of self and community for the unquestioning silence of an inauthentic existence.

Fortunately, if I am right, there are lessons to be learned from India, China, and Japan that may serve to blunt the deadening effects/consequences to which a principle of separation of church and state, taken by itself, seems inevitably to lead. Our best hope for a healthy and harmonious Global society will be a set of policies and attitudes that draws liberally from each of these societies, and perhaps others as well. If we can resist the temptation, characteristic of the Western Philosophical enterprise, to believe that we must choose one candidate over the others – if we can cultivate a global dialogue in which proponents of more than one tradition have a voice – then we will also stand a good chance of creating a global community in which adherents of different religious and spiritual backgrounds can live peacefully with one another, listening to and learning from people whose heritage, beliefs, and practices differ radically from their own.

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