

The Genius of American Religion

I open today's sermon with a confession: The Sunday closest to the Fourth of July always makes me a tad uneasy.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that I'm not patriotic, although my patriotism might take a slightly different form from most Americans. When I was in high school, I produced a patriotic multi-media slide show – which featured lots of flags and a soundtrack that included Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians – which I screened for churches in my hometown of Des Moines, Iowa. I don't object to flags flying in the churches, especially historic flags, and although I think the National Anthem during the worship service might take things a tad too far, I have no objection to *America the Beautiful*.

What makes me uneasy about church and the Fourth of July, however, is that I always feel – and sometimes I'm told as much – that the church observance of Independence Day somehow falls short, that I fail to demonstrate enough patriotism in church.

And so, I'd like to spend a few moments this morning talking about the appropriate relationship between church and state, religion and politics, patriotism and worship.

When the founders sat down to determine the shape of the nation, they puzzled for a long time over the relationship of church and state. The notion that a government could exist without support from religion was

a new one. Ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity in 312 C.E., kingdoms and governments had a designated – or state – religion. At times, as during the Holy Roman Empire, the pope called the shots. At other times, rulers bullied the church. In England, the example that most of the founders knew best, Anglicanism – the Church of England – was the established church, which meant that church officials were paid with public money.

In the early years of settlement in colonial America, however, there was great confusion about how church and state should be configured. In New Netherland, for example, Pieter Stuyvesant tried to make the Dutch Reformed Church the state religion, but the colony was far too ethnically and religiously diverse: Roman Catholics, Quakers, Lutherans, Presbyterians Huguenots, and Walloons (French-speaking Belgians), in addition to what one contemporary called “many atheists and various other servants of Baal.” In Pennsylvania, William Penn’s “Holy Experiment” sought to grant toleration to various religious groups, a policy that attracted Quakers, Lutherans, and other, smaller groups that had been persecuted elsewhere: Mennonites, the Amish, River Brethren, and the Schwenckfelders, followers of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig in the Old World.

What is now Delaware was settled by Swedish Lutherans, including a certain preacher, “more inclined to look into the wine can than into the Bible.”

When the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s, they sought to construct what John Winthrop called a “city on a hill,” a place where church and state would reinforce one another. The Puritans insisted, for example, that only church members in good standing could vote.

A Puritan minister named Roger Williams, however, dissented from this cozy arrangement. Williams understood the dangers of too close an association between church and state. He argued that what he called the “garden of the church” should be segregated from the “wilderness of the world” by means of a “wall of separation.” It is to Williams, then, that we owe the phrase “separation of church and state,” but to understand fully his

meaning we must remind ourselves that the Puritans did not share our romantic notions about wilderness. Wilderness was dark, a place of danger where evil lurked. So when Roger Williams spoke of wanting to protect the “garden of the church” from the “wilderness of the world,” he worried that the integrity of the faith would be compromised by too close an association with the state.

The Puritans didn’t like what they heard from Williams, so they haled him into court and banished him from the colony in 1636. Williams decamped to Rhode Island, where he purchased land from the Indians. In 1638 he was baptized by Ezekiel Holliman, thereby beginning the Baptist tradition in America.

From that time until fairly recently (the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979), Baptists have been watchmen on the wall of separation between church and state.

The founders, in their wisdom, drew on Roger Williams’s ideas when they formulated the First Amendment to the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This was an utterly unprecedented experiment, but more than two centuries later, I think it’s safe to conclude that it has worked very, very well. Religion has flourished here in the United States as nowhere else precisely because the government has (for the most part, at least) stayed out of the religion business.

This nation boasts an unprecedented variety of religious expression, from Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Reform Jews to Muslims, Christadelphians, and Shakers. No religious group can claim preferred status; they all compete with one another in the “free marketplace” of American religion. The First Amendment guarantees that.

But what does the First Amendment mean for people of faith? How should we conduct ourselves in the public sphere?

First, and let me be clear about this, the separation of church and state does *not* mean that people of faith cannot bring their religious convictions into the arena of public discourse. Not at all. I happen to believe, in fact, that public discourse would be impoverished without voices of faith.

But we must never forget that we live in a pluralistic society. The Constitution recognizes our right to free speech, but it also insists that we extend that courtesy to others, and one of the hallmarks of American society is that we honor the rights – and the voices – of minorities. That is what makes me patriotic more than anything else. As I look at American history, I see that we Americans, sooner or later, come to honor the sentiments of our charter documents – the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – that *everyone* is created equal. Sometimes, as in the case of minorities and women, that recognition comes along much too slowly. Much too slowly – and we’re not there yet. But the strongest case for patriotism, in my judgment, is that we get there, sooner or later.

And what about religious sentiments in public places? Surely it’s a good thing to have the Ten Commandments posted in public places, “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, and “In God We Trust” on our money.

Well, okay, but let’s step back for a moment and think about this. Remember Roger Williams? He wanted to protect the “garden of the church” from the “wilderness of the world” because he didn’t want the faith to be compromised by its association with the state. Williams worried that the faith would be trivialized if it became confused with the government – or if, in any way, the state was perceived to be supporting a particular religion.

And so I conclude today with a story. Many of you remember, I’m sure, when Roy S. Moore, chief justice of the Alabama supreme court, decided to place a two-and-one-half-ton granite monument, emblazoned with the Ten

Commandments, in the lobby of the judicial building in Montgomery. Moore had run for chief justice as the “Ten Commandments judge,” promising, if elected, to do just that. At the same time, he steadfastly refused to allow any other religious representations in that space – only the Ten Commandments.

I was one of the expert witnesses in the Alabama Ten Commandments case, and my testimony was essentially what I’ve said already this morning: that religion has flourished here in America precisely because the government has stayed out of the religion business, and any attempt to showcase or to favor any one religion to the exclusion of others represents a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment because it suggests that one religion is the state church. Furthermore, the entanglement of church and state ultimately trivializes the faith by identifying it with the government.

Months later, after Judge Myron Thompson ruled – correctly – that the presence of the Ten Commandments monument in the lobby of the judicial building represented a violation of the separation of church and state in the First Amendment, workers were preparing to remove the monument. One of the protesters screamed, “Get your hands off my God!”

Unless I miss my guess, one of the commandments etched into the side of that granite monument said something about graven images.

And that, of course, was precisely Roger Williams’s point about protecting the “garden of the church” from the “wilderness of the world” – lest the faith be compromised by its association with the state.

So on this Independence Day weekend, I declare myself a patriot. My study of American history tells me that, sooner or later, we Americans eventually rise to our better selves and honor the rights of others. And America is also a place where, in a free marketplace and because of the First Amendment, we enjoy free exercise of religion.

May it always be so.

Third Sunday after Pentecost

July 3, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut