

Separation of Church and State?

This past September I received an email objecting to the absence of the countries motto “In God we trust” on the new dollar coins. My initial response was one of strong disappointment and then it was brought to my attention that the motto is still stamped on the coin but only now it is located on the side of the coin rather than on its face. This series of revelations lead to my interest of learning more about the role of religion in America and I asked the question “Is there any validity of a separation between Church and State?” Should the church be involved in politics? Should the government meddle in the affairs of religion? Should the country pledge allegiance to God or should the State affairs be thoroughly absent of any faith based dogmas? To answer these questions we need to have a sense of how Christianity has participated in past political issues and at the same time try to understand the intent of the founding fathers of this country who wanted to create a land where justice would prevail and freedom would flourish.

The letter of St. James states that “religion pure and undefiled ... is this, to look after orphans and widows in their tribulation.” (James 1:27) The psalmist proclaims the need to “Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.” (Ps. 82:3) Do these biblical commands only apply to us when our government is not involved? Are we not suppose to comment when children suffer because a state agency has lost their focus on their purpose? Are we to be silenced when the innocent die because of the wars in Africa over the diamond market? Or as a faith community do we not make a statement when millions are methodically wiped out due to one countries “political agenda” as happened in the Jewish Holocaust, in the Gulag in the Soviet Union, and in the Armenia Genocide? The obvious answer is NO. Christ was not concerned about offending his rulers at the time which within the Roman system was the high priests and leaders of the Temple. St. John the Baptist challenged the moral decadence of King Herod and lost his life for it. St. John Chrysostom from the 5th century continuously confronted the irresponsibility of the Byzantine Empress and was exiled three times which eventually lead to his death. Thousands of bishops, priests, and lay people died under the Communist regime because they stood up against the atrocities of that atheistic “political agenda”. In the Scriptures and in the history of the Church we learn that there is not a separation of Church and State when it comes to putting a stop to injustices, but does this apply to 21st century America? To answer this question let us look closely at the foundation of this country which laid the roots to a political system that was established to protect the rights of all.

The first settlers by western man to the North American continent were motivated by varied reasons. The Jamestown, Virginia settlement was clearly formed for entrepreneurial aspirations compared to the Massachusetts colony which was founded more on the hopes of practicing the faith that they desired without the fear of persecution. No matter what the impetus was for the establishment of those communities it is clear that both of them were solidly based on the Christian tradition although at times quite fanatical and extremist by modern standards. Over the next century the country grew and at the same time its identity became more independent from the royal trappings of Great Britain. This eventually led to the 13 colonies of the Americas declaring its independence from its mother country for reasons of economic injustices, political abuses, and military persecution. This proclamation was ratified in the “Declaration of

Independence” on July 4, 1776 which clearly stated the need for a sovereign government to protect the intrinsic rights of every one of its citizens. These violated rights were based on the God of Nature and Creator of men, as stated in the Declaration. Such men as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams clearly relied on God for their inspiration of having a country where “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” could be held up as ideals and maintained as the expectation. The founding father’s connection to God is seen in their appeal to the “Supreme Judge” and the “protection of divine Providence” as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Some of these early molders of our country’s governmental system might not be considered as Christians in the strict sense of the word but they truly believed in the God who watched over them as they ambitiously sought independence from one of the world’s largest powers at the time. Thomas Jefferson proclaimed this clearly when he said God “watches over our country’s freedom and welfare”, “our efforts are in His hand and directed by it.”¹ God’s involvement in the formation of our country’s development was obvious in the eyes of those who directly influence it but the process of creating unity within the different colonies raised uncertainty of God’s involvement in our countries Constitution.

The United States, after the American Revolution, had the challenge of uniting a diverse ethnic, demographic, geographical and religious grouping of States into a cohesive republic. The authors of the Constitution needed to include the essential framework of how the country would operate and maintain unity, and at the same time not limit the diversity of its contingents through stereotypical norms of culture, politics and creeds. The founding fathers were well educated and pious men. Their piety is seen in such comments as from George Washington who looked to “the Almighty Being who rules over the universe”², or Benjamin Franklin who wrote “I believe in one God, creator of the universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped.”³ Also when James Madison reflected on the forming of the Constitution he states, “It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it (*the Constitution*) a finger of the Almighty hand ...”⁴ In addition to their belief in God, they also knew how history has proven very troublesome when a certain religion becomes formally adopted by a nation. With this in mind God was not mentioned once in the entire U.S. Constitution. This was done not so to encourage an atheistic country but rather allow for any person to freely practice what ever they might believe even if that means if they choose to believe in nothing. Striving for this balance of not requiring any practice of faith as law and also allowing the freedom of one’s own belief to be expressed has been maintained through the existence of the country. From Abraham Lincoln, to Theodore Roosevelt to our current political leaders we continue to discern the ambitious goal of having a country that respects the practice of all faiths but does not prevent the expressed belief of the majority. In my humble opinion it is not unconstitutional nor against the intent of our country’s founding fathers to pray in public, to have a Nativity scene in our front yard or to share our moral Christian beliefs in a political setting. What would be unconstitutional is to make baptism a requirement for US citizenship or to prohibit any public official, either a school teacher, the mayor of our city or the president of our country, from

¹ Meacham, John, *American Gospel*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, NY, 2006 p.75

² Pg. 14

³ Pg. 21

⁴ Pg. 87

practicing their faith tradition. With this knowledge, we as Orthodox Christian need to hold our beliefs as standards for living a life of integrity and challenge our political system to respect our beliefs while not comprising anyone's right to worship as they feel fit in this great country that defends the liberties of all.