

11-27-2018

Public Religion: Balancing on the Tightrope

Erik Lorenz

Southern Adventist University, erikl@southern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/hist_studentresearch



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lorenz, Erik, "Public Religion: Balancing on the Tightrope" (2018). *Student Research*. 13.
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/hist_studentresearch/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History and Political Studies Department at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

Erik Lorenz

American National and State Government

Professor Weiesmeyer

27 November 2018

Public Religion: Balancing on the Tightrope

Public religion is a uniquely American concept. Derived from the intentions of the Founding Fathers at the Framing, public religion today and for most of America's history is an exercise in balance. Walking the line between acknowledging the importance of religion and respecting the individual's right to their own beliefs is the hallmark of the American public religion. Private religion is inherently unbalanced by contrast; it is specific and sectarian- one's own particular beliefs, including religion, denomination, and even specific doctrine. The earliest colonies in America did not follow this balancing act, leaning towards the oppression of religious freedom and the imposition of a particular religion through the government. This first experience with public religion of the dictatorial sort left a sour taste in many Americans' mouths, and was the basis for the Founders' idea of public religion being a balancing act. Between the Founders' choice of language for the Declaration of Independence and the role of the First Amendment to the Constitution, a precedent was set for the public religion of America: non-sectarian, non-specific and inclusive, but still acknowledging the importance of religion to the identity of the nation.

The first iteration of American public religion began before America was even a unified nation. This first example followed the European trend of public religion: church and state combined, enforcing a particular brand of Christianity in this case upon the citizens. Private religion was simply not allowed unless it was the religion of the state. In Jamestown, a colony

beset by disaster from the outset, Sir Thomas Gates was tasked with bringing “order to the chaos” (Meacham 42), which was accomplished through harsh martial law that mandated religious observance. Gates legislated “religious observance on pain of death” (Meacham 43). These religious observations took many forms: attending services twice a day, keeping the Sabbath and not missing church on Sunday, and strict regulations on sexual activity were the prominent examples (Meacham 43). Jamestown was not the exception among the early American colonies; there were others wherein the private religion of those in power became the public religion through force of law.

Even the Puritans, held up as the shining example of religious dissenters seeking religious freedom in the New World, allowed only their own brand of religion in their Massachusetts colony. If anyone chose to disagree with the Puritan beliefs, to have their own private religion that differed from the state approved one, they “shall have free liberty to keep away from us” (Meacham 48). These were the words of the Massachusetts minister Nathaniel Ward. The Puritans took their enforcement of a sectarian public religion even farther than inviting dissenters to keep away; they banished a woman from their colony for daring to believe according to her own interpretation of the Bible. Anne Hutchinson believed in righteousness by faith (Meacham 49), a dangerous idea for a society built on the idea of salvation through works, or adherence to “temporal laws” (Meacham 49). Again, the public religion of this early colony was one of intolerance; the state enforced the rules of the church.

This first example of American public religion found in the early colonies greatly influenced the Founding Fathers by pushing them to avoid any semblance of religious intolerance or a specific, enforceable public religion. For the founders, a necessary part of public religion was allowance for private religion. When the time came for a Declaration of

Independence, the Fathers took great care to avoid any specific reference to a particular god or religion, much less the narrower confines of a denomination. They referenced only “‘Nature’s God’ . . . ‘Creator’ . . . ‘supreme judge of the world’ . . . and ‘divine providence’” (Meacham 73). This leaves the individual free to supply the specifics with the details from their own private religion. According to the Declaration’s author, Thomas Jefferson, the document was “‘intended to be an expression of the American mind’”, (Meacham 72), meaning the document was supposed to speak for the American people in whole. Therefore, the public religion described in the document reflected the people’s desire for the American public religion: a broad acknowledgment of the importance of religion within the American culture but without any intrusions on one’s private religion.

The public religion intended by the Founders, as evidenced by the wording of the Declaration of Independence, naturally fits right in to the place religion is assigned through the First Amendment to the Constitution. The first section of the amendment, saying “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” (amend. I) clearly prevents the state from joining with any church to enforce ecclesiastical law like the early colonies. It also establishes a necessary distance that the church and state must maintain; government and government officials can acknowledge religion but must stay far enough away from any specific faith. This helps write the spirit of public religion into law. The second section of the First Amendment, “or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” writes into law the complete allowance of private religion, enforcing the Founders’ vision of public religion that includes the right to private religion.

I can see no better public religion than the one the Founders envisioned and wrote into the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Acknowledging religion’s place in American culture while maintaining the freedom to follow one’s conscience in private religion is

the perfect tightrope walking act. Jimmy Carter, as President, gives a perfect example of the public religion so carefully crafted in this country. Carter chose Micah 6:8 for his inaugural address (Meacham 216), believing a call to justice, mercy, and humility was inclusive and not in any way sectarian. Carter also understood the intricacies of public religion due to the prominence of religion in American culture. Carter put it this way: “Separation is specified in the law, but for a religious person . . . you can’t divorce religious beliefs from public service. At the same time, of course, in public office you cannot impose your own religious beliefs on others” (Meacham 216-217). Carter understood the need to be inclusive and not thrust a specific religion or denomination on the nation, and he exemplified the struggle to balance the importance of religion with the need for separation; this is why he is a great example of how I believe public religion should be.

Public religion began in America as the enforcement of a private religion upon all the citizens of early settlements. The Founding Fathers shaped public religion away from this totalitarian nature to a careful balance that persists today. Through careful selection of language in the Declaration of Independence and support in the First Amendment, the Fathers brought about the public religion that acknowledges the place of prominence religion holds in society while \not tied to a specific religion or denomination and allowing for the practice of private religion as one sees fit. This is the public religion still today, and I believe it is the best that can be attained in such a diverse nation as this.

Work Cited

Meacham, Jon. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*.

Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007.