

ARE WE A RELIGIOUS NATION?

(07/07/19)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 22:15-22

John 18:36

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’” (John 18:36)

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In his response to the Pharisees, Jesus addresses the relationship of church and state. However, he does not elaborate what belongs to the state, to the nation and its leaders, and what belongs to God. He does give us permission to pay taxes, but he does not clarify God’s relationship with the nation; he is not specific about what sort of allegiance we owe to God and what sort of allegiance we owe to our nation, an issue that the Jehovah Witnesses have at least attempted to address. He also does not clarify what it would mean to be a religious nation and, more specifically, a Christian nation. I’m sure this was far from Jesus’ mind at a time in history when the Christian church had yet to come into being, centuries before Charlemagne and Theodosius decreed that Christianity was the official, in fact, the only permissible religion throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

In our worship service on this Fourth of July weekend, we sing two beautiful patriotic hymns: *My Country*, *’Tis of Thee*, and *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*. These hymns, which always evoke tears in me, express the hope that our land may become what we believe the God of creation has envisioned for us and for all people—a land “bright with freedom’s holy light,” a “sweet land of liberty, a land where freedom rings from every mountainside.” In addition to verbalizing a prayer of thanksgiving, they articulate the hope that God will help bring about a state of affairs that, unfortunately, remains more of an aspiration than a present reality for many of our citizens and literally billions of people around the world.

These hymns speak to our nation’s relationship with God and what kind of nation God wants us to be. They lead us to think about whether or not our nation is truly committed to these ideals. They raise the question of whether we truly are a religious nation, a Christian nation, and how we believe God is working to bring about, to actualize these desirable states of affairs.

In one of his letters to H. G. Wells, Henry James (who is one of my favorite authors) wrote, “I congratulate you on your unawareness of complexity.” Far too often it seems we value

the simple answers that don't really fit rather than struggle honestly with the complexities of a situation. I believe this is the case when it comes to our nation's relationship with God.

This past week we have heard people and religious organizations enthusiastically proclaim us to be a Christian nation, and to give thanks that we are truly a nation "under God." I recall that in the 1950s, when the phrase "under God" was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, the Supreme Court made a statement to the effect that we are a religious nation. I'm not sure what recent Supreme Court rulings on the right to discriminate on the basis of religious principles are saying about whether we truly are a religious nation or not.

The problem with affirming that we are a religious nation is that the term "religious" is a complex concept. What makes a nation a religious nation? Is a nation religious because its founding fathers were religious individuals? Is it religious if its Constitution was drafted on the basis of religious or humanistic principles? Are we religious if a certain percent of our people say that they believe in God (and if so, what percent)? To be classified as a religious nation, do a certain percent of our people have to claim membership in or attend church regularly (again, what percent)? In order to qualify as religious, would a nation have to be moral in its treatment of its people and other people around the world?

Which nations would we classify as religious nations? Is Canada a religious nation? Is Sweden? Is Israel (where most of the people are Jewish)? Are France, Italy, and Spain (where most of the people are Roman Catholic)? Are Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia (where most of the people are Muslim)? Is India (where most of the people are Hindu)? Is Myanmar (where most of the people are Buddhist)? Do we get to declare ourselves religious by our own definition, by our own criteria, or do we have to be judged as a religious nation by others based on how we act?

I confess that I'm not sure I know what it means to be a religious nation. I'm also not sure it's a good idea to be one. I am comfortable with our nation being a secular nation comprised of and protective of individuals of many different religious persuasions. When I look at nations that are set up as theocracies, as religious nations, including Israel, I confess that I am not impressed by the way they oppress and persecute their religious minorities, in effect setting up an apartheid society based on religion rather than race or ethnicity. I am particularly troubled by the genocide that is taking place in Myanmar, a Buddhist nation, in its persecution of the

Rohingya Muslim population. In every so-called “religious nation,” I see their shadow being acted out in cruel and inhumane ways, ways that run counter to their own religious ideals.

This conundrum in classifying nations also applies to individuals. When I look around, especially when I look at the actions of the leaders of our country (including those who claim they are religious), I find it difficult to distinguish the religious persons from the non-religious persons, with a few notable exceptions on each end of the spectrum.

I not only don’t care if we fall into the category of a religious nation, I would rather we didn’t. I don’t think that religion, that powerful creative, integrative, healing, and guiding force or presence in people’s lives, is carried forth by nations, *at least not Jesus’ kind of religion*. Jesus told us that his kingdom is not of this world. With his openness to diversity, e.g., in his relationship with Samaritans, I have my doubts that he would like his own nation, the state of Israel, to be a theocracy. I think religion is carried forth, is put into practice *only* by individuals and *maybe* to some extent by churches--if they are true to their calling.

Think about it. If you find meaning in your life, if you find meaning in and through your religious faith, it won’t be because you live in a religious country. It will be because you have discovered what it means to experience the reality of God and because you have decided to embark upon a spiritual journey to find out what this relationship with God means in the living of your life. This means you can be religious if you claim affiliation with any number of religious groups, and you can be spiritual in the way you live your life even if you claim no particular affiliation.

The religious backbone of our nation is not the Constitution or the Supreme Court rulings. The religious backbone of our nation takes place every time an individual makes an ethical decision, a decision that is guided by the Holy Spirit. It comes into being when individuals in high positions in government, business, and industry care about people more than they care about profits. It solidifies when people treat each other as people, when we act like children of God and treat each other like children of God.

The religious backbone of America does not lie in a belief in a God-ordained exceptionalism, a kind of manifest destiny. It is true that we can be a “light to the nations,” a witness to other nations of how a true democracy can work, how enlightened capitalism can work to create a better life, including education, housing, health care, a financially secure retirement, and the opportunity to work at a job that pays a living wage, for all its citizens—*all of*

them. The religiosity of our country lies in the individuals who have found their meaning in life and who have chosen to live this out in relationship to God. This little group of people here this morning is the religious backbone of America!

Take a good look at America today. What do you think? It has its good points and it has its bad points. It has its strengths and it has its weaknesses. There is a lot in our history that are a source of pride. There are parts of our history that should be a source of shame. Our country is not perfect, but it's not bad—and it has an awful lot of potential! The question is: how are we going to make sure this potential comes to fruition in accordance with God's will?

Take a good look at yourself today. What do you think? You have your good points and you have your bad points. You have your strengths and you have your weaknesses. There's a lot in your history that are a source of pride. There are parts of your history that should be a source of shame. You're not perfect, but you're not bad—and you have an awful lot of potential! The question is: how are you going to make sure your potential comes to fruition in accordance with God's will?

When we compare our society to ourselves as individuals, it sometimes feels that we are looking at ourselves. This is because our society is nothing more than the individuals that comprise it. If we all were 25% less prejudiced, our nation would be 25% less prejudiced. If we were more religious, our nation would be more religious. We do well to be concerned about our government and the problems like income inequality that we have here in America, problems that affect some of our brothers and sisters much more than others, but as we do so we should never lose sight of the importance of the individual person, of each and every one of us.

If God is truly guiding our nation, as our hymns suggest, then God is going to guide it through the hearts and minds of individual persons. Let's face it—we deserve the leaders we elect. They reflect more of us, more of our shadow, than we are willing to admit. If we want to change the shape of our Congress, if we want it to be more morally sensitive, then we should begin by reordering *our own lives* and voting certain elements of our own life out of power!

In the second century BCE, the Chinese sage Confucius wrote:

The ancients who wished to preserve the fresh or clear character of the people of the world would first set about ordering their national life.

Those who wished to order their national life would first set about regulating their family life.

Those who wished to regulate their family life would first set about cultivating their personal life.

Those who wished to cultivate their personal life would first set about setting their hearts right.

Those who wished to set their hearts right would first set about making their wills sincere.

(from the opening chapter of Ta Hsueh—The Great Learning)

I love this quote by Confucius because he calls our attention to the ultimate importance of the individual and the power that we have as individuals to shape our family, our nation, and even the world. Perhaps we focus too much on somewhat nebulous entities like “the government,” “the society,” “the culture,” and we forget that we the people *are* the government, the society, and the culture.

It is difficult to see the future, to see what lies ahead for our country. Of course, we want our country to move in the right direction, though we may differ in our beliefs about what direction our country should take and the means that we should employ to achieve these ends. We want our country to be a light to the nations, to realize its tremendous potential to bring about the kind of society that not only enables but promotes fullness of life for everyone, and we want this not only for our own country but for all of God’s children around the world.

How are we going to do this? We can begin by deepening our own spirituality, by deepening our relationship with God. I’m not sure it would be a good idea to make our nation a Christian nation, but we as individuals can certainly become more Christian in our thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds. And we can begin this process by taking stock of ourselves as we meet God, as we encounter or are encountered by God in our worship and in our celebration of our Lord’s presence in our communion service this morning.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

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July 7, 2019