

Separating church, state doesn't preclude religion

The Rev. Paul Viggiano

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Judge Barbara Crabb's declaration last month that the National Day of Prayer, traditionally celebrated on the second Thursday in May, is unconstitutional provides yet another example of how the church and state dialogue resembles a sitcom - "Don't miss the fun when our stars don't realize they're talking about different subjects!"

People talk past one another. Both sides grow frustrated because the other guy just doesn't get it. Is separation of church and state preferable? What's the alternative? What do people mean when they say they believe in a separation of church and state?

If the separation of church and state means the president should not wear an episcopal mitre (Pope's hat) and speak ex cathedra (with papal authority), I agree.

If the separation of church and state means the Joint Chiefs of Staff should disregard the recommendation of modern-day prophets to engage in holy wars, I agree.

If the separation of church and state means the government should not create a church where senators are the clergy and the Supreme Court administers the sacraments, preaches sermons and excommunicates sinners, I agree.

I'm a Christian and a pastor. And I'm an advocate of the separation of church and state. I can say this because I realize that church is not synonymous with God.

The Scriptures tell us that the church is an institution created by God and the state is an institution created by God. But they have separate roles.

The church shouldn't arrest people and the state shouldn't baptize people. These institutions should remain separate. But the separation of church and state is not the same as the separation of God and state.

One need merely stroll the nation's capitol, with all its granite carvings paying homage to God, or peruse the nation's documents from the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to realize that God was never asked to stand at the doorstep of our nation's civil affairs. Do we think our Founding Fathers (and earlier Pilgrims and Puritans) had a corporate split-personality disorder while composing the instruction by which our nation was to be governed? If they believed in separation of God and state, why so much God talk?

Let's, for a moment, suppose the Founders were victims of their own religious environment. Maybe they accidentally or inadvertently included God's name out of mere habit. Maybe they made a mistake that needs to be rectified. What then is the religion which is to undergird our political convictions? I can anticipate the steamy response. "No religion!" For the sake of argument let's change the term. Let's not call it religion, let's call it a "life and world view."

For many, religion is not merely lighting candles and chanting mantras. It does not end at quiet times, fasting and gesticulations. It is a life and world view. It is the means by which people determine what is right and good and true. It is how people determine how to raise their children, love their spouse and even vote for a candidate.

Having a life and world view is a universal necessity of humanity. Everyone has a life and world view that governs their decisions. You can call it by another name, but it's your religion. It's your bottom line. If someone asked you to prove it, you couldn't. It's immaterial. It's a conviction, a faith. Like love, honor, courage and beauty, it's abstract. You may see its results but you can't see it. Like time, energy, space and mass, it is a necessary part of your reality but it cannot be observed.

Your life and world view resides in your psyche (Greek for soul) and you received it. Your parents, your teachers, your friends, your favorite artist, rock star or comedian have all contributed to your religion. People comfort themselves by calling it by another name, but it is their religion. Even a person's conviction to remove Judeo-Christian ethics and prayers from politics is itself a religious conviction.

I am for the separation of church and state. But the separation of religion and state - of a life and world view and state, of God and state - is a logical

impossibility. And there is no reason why a life and world view derived from the Scriptures is less qualified to have a voice in politics than any other life and world view. Any thinking person realizes they have a god - not identifying who or what that god may be does not excuse the reality.

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