

Church and State: Friends?

It is no surprise that Christians find the notion of the separation of church and state both attractive and repulsive. It is attractive in that we all agree that the United Methodist Church has no business trying to take over the state capitol in Nevada. Likewise, the governor of Tennessee cannot draft an army and take over the Southern Baptist Church in that or any other state. This is because church and state are institutions that have boundaries and the one cannot infringe on the other so as to determine how the other acts.

However, the notion of the separation of church and state is repulsive because any attempt to totally separate the two is a “mission impossible.” Take the Presidential election this year. Some of the candidates are spiritual persons and find themselves having to give guarantees that their faith will not influence their ability to act as President of the country. That kind of guarantee is a sham because it is impossible. If one is a dedicated Christian, then what Christ wants of His people determines in large part the values of the spiritual candidate. If one can say “I am a Christian” and “I can set aside the values of Jesus while I am President,” then that person is no Christian as we see in the New Testament.

The other day I read a chapter that ended with this sentence: “Praise [of God] is the beginning of social practice.” Such a statement would twist the noses of some running for President this year. I like that sentence so much that I am going to give you the paragraph that precedes it. It was sent to me by a kind friend. As you read, think of an ancient king as our president.

“The king is to be an intervener for equity, righteousness, and truth, exactly as is Yahweh, exactly as the liturgy articulates. The king is to do on earth what Yahweh does among the gods (heavenly beings). Indeed, Israel could imagine no other kind of God. The liturgy intends to *make a world* of justice and righteousness. That is what the liturgy is all about. And the king is to live that world and make it concretely available for those in the liturgy. The praise is Israel is not done in a social vacuum. It is not an idle verbal act, but a resolve to honor in life the God sung in worship. Praise is the beginning of political practice.”¹

Great thoughts, aren't they? When we are at worship the Spirit of the Great God is energizing us for the responsibilities we have in our neighborhood, at our job, in our family, for our world. Since God is the essence of goodness, love, sensitivity, and justice, perhaps we ought to require every candidate for public office to be present at worship, especially our president.

“Your [God's] will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”²

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¹ Walter Brueggemann, Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1988), p. 68. Emphasis (underline) mine.

² Cf. NRSV, Luke 11:2, note h.