

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



Voters fill out ballots at a polling place inside the Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church on Election Day, Nov. 8, 2016, in Cincinnati. (RNS/AP/John Minchillo)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

August 20, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The role of religion and politics has always been controversial in America, from its inception to the present day.

Many of the original colonies were founded by religious communities looking for a place where they could practice their faith. Sadly, too many of them, once established, then persecuted those who did not share their faith. Dissenters were seen not only as a threat to their faith but also a threat to their political institutions.

A few of the colonies, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Maryland, began with a different vision, one of tolerance. They were fleeing Europe where religious conflicts led to violence and even wars that disrupted political and economic life. They longed for something better.

After the U.S. Constitution was written, many demanded the federal government be kept out of religion; the result was the First Amendment, stating, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

At the beginning, the First Amendment applied only to the federal government, but soon the states (successors to the colonies) also got out of the religion business. At the same time, most felt that religion fostered the honesty and sense of duty essential to a functioning democracy.

While America had no established religion, Christian morality still influenced law and politics. There were laws dealing with marriage, divorce, birth control, abortion, prostitution, gay sex, suicide and more that all reflected Christian norms. Many such laws have been successfully challenged by a more libertarian view that prioritizes individual autonomy and freedom.

Advertisement

Meanwhile, Christians concerned about social justice joined labor unions and movements fighting for laws protecting workers, advocating for civil rights and helping the marginalized.

The change is exemplified by San Francisco, where go-go dancing was legalized but smoking indoors was banned, meaning the dancers now have the right to work in a smoke-free environment. Quite a change from the 1950s.

There are two extremes when dealing with the role of religion in politics. One argues that God is supreme and that his views should be legislated and enforced by the state. The other argues that any law motivated by religious values should be unconstitutional.

I also believe God is supreme, but there is a problem with wanting to legislate his will: Who is going to decide what is God's will?

In Iran, it is the clerical establishment that determines what is God's will. Too many religious leaders believe they have a direct line to God and therefore want to impose their views on others. They also presume there is only one way to fulfill God's will. Such arrogance is the epitome of clericalism.

Extremists who want to bar religious motivations from politics would limit the religious freedom of believers and ignore American history. They need to remember the role of religion and religious ministers in the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war movements. For many, inspired by the Hebrew prophets, working for justice is a religious duty. If those with religious motivation had been banned from civil rights and peace activism, the movements would have failed if they had ever even gotten started.

In American politics, we need to agree on what to do, not why we are doing it. Different people will be motivated by different things, especially in complex legislation. That is how democracy works.

Christian nationalism and Catholic integralism suffer from the temptation to arrogantly believe only they know God's will.

[Tweet this](#)

As long as we stay within constitutional rules, we can push to get our way. Sometimes we win, sometimes we lose. If we are willing to throw away the Constitution in order to get our way, then we have moved out of politics and into despotism and revolution.

Christian nationalism and Catholic integralism suffer from the temptation to arrogantly believe only they know God's will.

Christian nationalism is the belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and should maintain or return to its Christian heritage. Catholic integralism is an old idea — that when churches and kings clash, the church should win — applied to a modern era, insisting Catholics should occupy important positions to exert religious influence over society.

The desire to impose God's will can lead to authoritarianism. The desire to be politically relevant can lead to prostituting religion for partisan purposes.

Catholics need to remember that some of those involved with Christian nationalism do not believe that Catholics are Christians. What place will they have in the new America of the Christian nationalists?

Catholic integralists are different from earlier attempts by Catholics to dominate politics. This is a lay movement, whereas in the past it was the Catholic clergy who wanted to run things. Catholic integralists are also cafeteria Catholics who choose to ignore much of Catholic social teaching that focuses on workers, migrants and global warming.

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the church has encouraged ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation for the common good. We know we don't have all the answers and can learn from others. Today's challenges and opportunities are too great for a single sectarian view. We all need to work together for a better world.