



Church-State Relations in America and Europe (Part 1 of 3)

Robert Kraynak on America's Civil Religion

HAMILTON, New York, MARCH 26, 2005 (Zenit) - Alexis de Tocqueville admired the way Americans were able to combine the spirit of religion with the spirit of liberty in the 1830s.

Robert Kraynak, professor of political science at Colgate University and author of "Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World" (Notre Dame), explains in the first part of this three-part interview how civil religion prevented a totally secular democracy from arising in America for nearly 200 years, and how it might be a good model for other nations.

This is the first of a three-part interview.

Q: Recently, Cardinal Ratzinger described the American model of church-state relations as more hospitable to religious truth and institutions than European models. What features of the American model might be more hospitable to religion?

Kraynak: The American model of church-state relations was best described by Alexis de Tocqueville in "Democracy in America" more than 150 years ago. He expressed his admiration, much like Cardinal Ratzinger today, for the way Americans were able to combine the spirit of religion with the spirit of liberty.

The crucial point for Tocqueville was the distinction between laws and customs. By law, Americans separated church and state; but in their customs or mores, Americans insisted on a prominent role for religion in public and private life. This meant Americans rejected the model of Great Britain, which established a national Church of England, and the practice of regional princes in Germany, who gave legal support to their own denominations.

By rejecting state establishment, Americans never experienced the problems of clerical power and were able to develop a robust pluralism where the various Christian churches pursued religious orthodoxy as voluntary associations on roughly equal terms, although reformed Protestant churches had a historical advantage.

While favoring voluntary worship, Americans also believed that religion had a public role in promoting republican virtue. Hence, they developed a nondenominational civil religion that was expressed in the Declaration of Independence's doctrine of God-given natural rights -- the belief that liberty derived from "the laws of Nature and Nature's God" and that inalienable rights were endowments of the Creator.

This republican religion was later expressed in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which said that "this nation under God" will enjoy a new birth of freedom -- a sentiment also echoed in the Pledge of Allegiance and in countless public statements connecting the blessings of American freedom with God's providence and judgment.

For nearly 200 years, this civil religion prevented a totally secular democracy from arising in America, while allowing and even protecting a deeper piety based on the revealed truths of Christian faith in the many Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches of America.

American piety is thus a special blend of three elements: the disestablishment of religion, a republican civil religion of God-given natural rights, and pluralism in the pursuit of Christian orthodoxy.

Q: A recent article in the New York Times described the strong collaborations between Christian and non-Christian politicians in Italy. Some European states even subsidize the Church. Why might Cardinal Ratzinger think the United States is a better model?

Kraynak: In comparing attitudes to religion, Cardinal Ratzinger reportedly said that "from many points of view the American model is better. ... Europe has remained bogged down in caesaro-papism." I think Cardinal Ratzinger meant that a lingering Christian establishment in Europe may be holding back a renewal of spiritual life that could be unleashed by voluntary religious participation and pluralism as in America.

Italy, for example, looks like it has state-sponsored Catholicism with the government's historic ties to the Christian Democratic Party, public schools that have crucifixes in classrooms, the Pope living next door and Christian art and churches publicly supported everywhere. But the people seem to lack religious zeal and have disregarded Catholic teaching in legalizing divorce, abortion and gay marriage, as well as in their alarmingly low birthrates.

The same is true of England and the Scandinavian countries: officially Anglican or Lutheran but practically indifferent or hostile to Christianity -- and much more openly anti-Christian than Italy, which still has an affectionately pro-Catholic feel.

France is the extreme case in embracing a totally "laicized" state -- enforcing a ban on all religious displays in public schools and all references to God by public officials. This is state-sponsored secularism that also suppresses religious vitality.

Cardinal Ratzinger looks at most European nations -- he could have mentioned Canada as well -- and he sees the worst possible combination of historical residues of Christian establishment and utter indifference to Christian faith; a post-Christian world that would not even allow a reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in the Constitution of the European Union.

By comparison, the American situation looks relatively healthy: higher rates of church attendance and professions of faith -- although secular forces in the U.S. judiciary, universities and the media are trying to create a secular America just like Europe and Canada. And one cannot forget that the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations in America have been rocked by scandals and divisive battles that have damaged the faith.

Even if we grant the relative superiority of the American condition today -- which I am prepared to do -- the question Cardinal Ratzinger leaves unanswered is whether Europe could be saved by adopting some features of the American model, such as disestablishment and pluralism, without possessing other vital elements -- namely, a civil religion of God-given natural rights and a belief in Christian orthodoxy.

I think that a nondenominational civil religion is feasible for Europeans to adopt as a basis for human rights. Even the French could come to see that their historic commitment to "the rights of man" is better grounded in the belief that humans are made in the image of God rather than in the skeptical reason of the French Enlightenment.

But the quest for religious orthodoxy -- for ultimate religious truth -- seems to be dying or dead in Europe today: Europe looks like a dying civilization in which the highest and noblest aims of man have been forgotten or rejected as dangerous. This may be an overstatement, but there is something different about the European and American attitudes to religious truth.

[Monday: Is Europe more Catholic?]

Contact: Catholic Online

_____ <http://www.catholic.org> CA, US

_____ Catholic Online - Publisher, 661-869-1000

Keywords: Church, Religion, America, Europe, Relations, State, Tocqueville

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.