December 13, 2006

Protecting Democracy Comes Before Promoting Faith

Preserving democratic secularism in the face of a growing faction of religious extremism.

by Daniel C. Dennett

This week's question could not be more important. Events around the world in recent years amply demonstrate that the religious freedom we enjoy in the United States is one of the essential building blocks of our democracy.

What we tend to lose sight of, however, is the price we must pay for this religious freedom: we must commit ourselves to the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state *even when the principle works against the interests of our particular religion*.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it." This wise maxim, applied to the First Amendment principle of the separation of church and state, has permitted the principle to drift into disrepair. People are encouraged to think that while there may be all sorts of borderline cases and vexing conundrums about just where to draw the line, examining them will only arouse anxiety and discord–so let's just cover everything with a fine fog of pious, presumed consensus. We all honor the First Amendment and that's that, and that's fine. So it would be, if it weren't for the steady pressure of those who would exploit our benign neglect, encroaching gradually on what makes the principle work–to the extent that it does.

For instance, the Christian conservatives in the country who wish to declare that this is a Christian nation are becoming bolder and bolder in their willingness to impose their own viewpoint on those who disagree. Fortunately, there are the beginnings of an organized resistance to this takeover, such as the Interfaith Alliance (http://www.interfaithalliance.org/site/pp.asp? c=8dJIIWMCE&b=447561), chaired by Walter Cronkite. I enthusiastically support this effort, even though I am myself an atheist. Atheism is one of the live rails of American politics-touch it and you're toast. Fair enough. Those are the current facts of life. Not so long ago, you couldn't be elected if you were Catholic, or Jewish, or African-American. But shouldn't we install another live rail, on the opposite side of the religious spectrum?

It ought to be just as much a fact of life that anybody who declares that their allegiance to their religion comes before their allegiance to democracy is simply unelectable. Fifty years ago President Eisenhower nominated Charles E. Wilson, then president of General Motors, as his Secretary of Defense. At the nomination hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Wilson was asked to sell his shares in General Motors, but he objected. When asked if his continued stake in General Motors mightn't unduly sway his judgment, he replied: "For years, I thought what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa." Some in the press, unsatisfied with this response, stressed only the second half of his response –"What's good for General Motors is good for the country" — and in response to the ensuing furor, Wilson was forced to sell his stock in order to win the nomination.

Substitute "The American Baptist Church" or "The Roman Catholic Church" for "General Motors" and ask yourself whether you want candidates who waffle on this score to lead the nation. Even if it is true, as Wilson opined, that other things being equal, what's good for GM is good for the country, people wanted to know which way he'd lean in the perhaps rare cases where he had to choose between what was good for the country and what was good for his corporation. They wanted him to put General Motors firmly in second place, and we want our politicians to put the welfare of the nation ahead of the welfare of their religion as well. If they won't make a solemn pledge about this, we should worry.

Consider the situation in Turkey. There are radical Islamic groups intent on using the democratic process to vote in an Islamic state that would then throw away the ladder and abolish democracy, replacing it with theocracy. What should be done about this is not at all obvious. If the people democratically vote to demolish democracy, isn't this just like a club voting itself out of existence? It would be the will of the majority, after all. In Algeria, harsh measures were taken in 1992 to avoid just such a democratic self-annihilation, with a vicious civil war resulting. In Turkey, such a calamity has been averted, or at least postponed. In 1996, an Islamic party won control, but the vigorous secularist

reaction soon led to the resignation of the prime minister. A moderate Islamic party is now in power, and it has wisely restrained itself from any attempt to impose Islam on the nation, committing itself to preserving the secularism of the state.

In the United States, the problem is no less real for being less dramatic: There are many deeply religious people who believe that they may democratically impose more and more of their creed on the nation, by simply exercising their First Amendment rights to free expression and creating thereby a climate of opinion that renders opposition by secularists politically ineffective. This is a grave danger to democracy, more subversive, in fact, than anything Al Qaeda threatens.

Many of us believe that American democracy is the best hope of the world, that it provides the most secure and reliable — though hardly foolproof — platform on the planet for improving human welfare. If it tumbles, the whole world is in deep trouble. We therefore put the securing of American democracy — America's secular democracy, with separation of church and state — at the very top of our list of priorities.

That is something worth giving our lives for, if it comes to that, but only because, and so long as, we continue to believe that America plays this role of political lifeboat for Planet Earth. Isn't this what America asks of all of us? If so, then we must each ask ourselves: do we put the welfare of the nation above the welfare of our particular religion? If you cannot answer Yes to that question, you should consider that you are not a good American, but a part of the problem: you are taking advantage of American religious freedom without being prepared to pledge your support to the principle that secures it.

We are currently asking the Shiites and Sunnis of Iraq to put their allegiance to their nation ahead of their allegiance to their religion. We must surely ask ourselves, and especially our political leaders, to make the same solemn commitment.

Lead image courtesy of Ed Uthman (https://www.flickr.com/photos/euthman/).

More on: Al Qaeda (/onfaith/tag/al-qaeda), American Democracy (/onfaith/tag/american-democracy), American Politics (/onfaith/tag/american-politics), Catholic Church (/onfaith/tag/catholic-church),