

Monastic Scribe 103 - April 24, 2026

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Positions towards the relationship of religion and politics have been heard more forcefully of late. This is hardly new. Power, authority, righteousness have been seen on both sides for centuries. There was a time in medieval years when Christendom accepted that the Pope was superior to all sovereign powers. But the far more frequent dynamic, especially in modern times, is the tendency of the state to try to control the churches, or at least get religious backing for its governing. China controls the official church and is trying to suppress the underground church. Russia has church and state working hand in hand.

Here, in our beloved United States, there are figures in government who try to coopt religion for its own purposes. Voices are heard, especially among evangelical Christians, to “return” the country to be a Christian nation. In many cases this means a white, male Christian country. “Christian nationalism” sounds attractive to some citizens. Along with Jews, Muslims and others, the Catholic Church, as well as many Protestant churches, see the dangers in this development. Through economic, as well as political, pressures the churches are coaxed to abide by the political goals of the moment. The religion that is preferred is more political than spiritual, more patriotic than faithful to God.

Some people are shocked when they hear a religious leader criticize the government. But religious voices are concerned about the morality of the country, not its politics. Speaking up for the cause of morality in the public sphere is once again being heard and rejected by some. The tradition of most churches is to avoid partisan politics. This was neglected in some elections when pastors publicly told people how to vote. Their intention might have been good, that is to support the party that they thought took a more religious view of some sexual practices. But they had no right to tell people how to vote.

On the other hand, there are clear moral issues that transcend partisan politics and promote what is human. Catholic Social Justice, as well as Jewish ethics and many Protestant churches as well, accept the place of morality in the public sphere, that which concerns the common good and the care of all citizens especially the poor and marginalized. Pope Leo XIII began the modern Catholic teaching on social issues in 1890 when he articulated positions of care for the working class after the industrial revolution. The Second Vatican Council, among

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its many teachings, issued a “Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World” in 1965. It discussed issues such as the family, war and peace, the arms race, faith and culture, economic life and development and similar themes. Popes since John XXIII have brought up social issues that need to be seen from moral perspectives. Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis were equally vocal.

What are some of the social issues today? I would name care of the environment as a very moral issue; the care of creation is required of us humans. Basic respect of all humans, even those who are immigrants, prisoners, people of other religions and sexual orientations is a moral demand. Racism, anti-Semitism, neglect of the poor and indigenous peoples are all areas of lack of morality. Health care is a right to be defended. Working conditions and a just wage are moral demands. And war, peace, the arms race are all human and therefore moral concerns.

The basis of Christian morality, of course, is Jesus Christ. He taught us the Our Father where we pray “thy will be done on earth...”. He told us whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him. Among these he specifically mentions the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. His teaching of the Beatitudes calls blessed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are peacemakers. Greed is one of the most frequent vices he mentions in his parables.

I wonder whether we who are religious practicing people have not been too comfortable, indifferent in accepting of injustices. American culture has emphasized individualism rather than social commitments. Religion has often been the way to seek God’s blessings on us in this life so we can be accepted into everlasting life. Go to church one day a week and you’ll qualify for heaven!

On the other hand, there are many, many people who get involved in corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The example of the people in Minneapolis as they looked out for each other and for the needy was exemplary. They are trying to balance the power of corporations, the state, the wealthy who do not care.

Maybe the crisis that our country finds itself in, which includes the crises in the churches, is a call to become more involved, to practice our faith beyond the requirements of institutionalized religion and really practice our religious

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traditions. We Catholics are privileged to have had Pope Francis and now Pope Leo to stand up and lead us in our traditional ways of morality and spirituality. I pray for the Pope and those who give themselves so that others may live more faithfully. You can let me know what you think by writing me at:

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.