

God & Caesar

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I grew up in a part of the world, Syria and Lebanon, where religion and state were intertwined, not separate. As an ethnic Armenian I also belong to a people who have a state religion, Armenian Apostolic, although I grew up as Protestant, a community birthed by Congregational missionaries.

In Syria, I was not part of the dominant religion, which was Muslim. Precisely because the country boasted several religions it allowed each religion to have a head, a president whom the state acknowledged as the representative of that particular religion/denomination.

The state religion was Muslim, yet I never saw flags in worshiping spaces. Schools curriculums included religion, yet students attended classes of their own faith. The justice system was founded on Muslim values, hence religious communities had their own courts reflecting their own religious values. While Friday was the state's day of Sabbath, Christians and Jews were free to acknowledge and celebrate their own. Although state and religion were not separate there were clear lines concerning the affairs of the state and the affairs of religion. And those lines were not crossed.

Today, I live in the US, which highly values separation of religion and state yet seems extremely confused about it. We see the same confusion in the Gospel of Mark when the leaders wanted to trap Jesus, asking - Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, to the state? Jesus said, Let Caesar have what belongs to him, and God have what belongs to God. It seems Jesus knew what we often forget - the state, as everything and all else in this world, belongs to God in the first place. So go ahead give to Caesar, for ultimately even Caesar belongs to God.

We, as a people of faith, know this to be true. All that we have and are, all that life is and has, belong to God. Hence, as in our faith story, all aspects of life, are connected and all are sacred and holy. Yes, including politics, money, sex and all the things we think are secular.

We have lost this faith perspective. Our culture has become so politicized that we see everything through the eyes of politics. Why is poverty a political issue and not a faith issue? Why are justice and money, about which the Scripture speaks extensively, political issues and not human, social, faith issues? Why is human rights a political issue since each of us is made in God's image and gifted with inherent birthright?

I suggest, as I did couple of weeks ago, that religion and politics are parallel roads, each informing a different aspect of life. While politics runs the affairs of the state and public life, religion gives meaning and transcendence to our lives, personal and communal. While the state looks out for its own interests alone, faith calls us to consider the interests of others, and all, as well. While the state can go to war, religion stands for peace. While partisan politics may cause despair, religion can be a source of hope and peace.

In a politicized and partisan society division and confusion reign, and hope feels hard to grasp. I suggest that we, a people of faith, identify ourselves not as "political left or right" but as a people of Good News, as followers of Jesus. I suggest that we rediscover our calling to partner with God to be healers, reconcilers and restorers of the world to what God intended it to be. We, people of faith, are not republicans or democrats or something else, we are followers of Jesus. More next week.