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United Church of Christ
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Religion and Politics

(Third in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

Matthew 22:17-21; Romans 13:1-7 NRSV

That there is a relationship between religion and politics in America today might hardly be denied. We may be as familiar with the religious viewpoints of major politicians as we are with their policy positions. Remember all the conversation about President Obama's religion? A member of a United Church of Christ congregation in Chicago, his political success was threatened by some of the sermons preached by his off the deep end pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Because of what his pastor said, political realities required that candidate Obama resign his membership in Trinity UCC in order to distance himself from Wright. Despite that recent history and his continuing professions of Christian faith, conversations continue among some Americans around the mistaken idea that the President is a Muslim. Those who claim it to be so, presumably find it disturbing. Consider also the candidates running for the 2012 Republican Presidential nomination. We know that Mitt Romney is a Mormon, that Rick Perry presently attends a Southern Baptist mega church and speaks of God and faith frequently, and that Michele Bachman is a fundamentalist Christian.

The phrase "separation of church and state," may often be spoken in our nation, but that does not mean that we don't care about the religion of our political leaders. And I think this is right. We ought to care, unless we think that religion is irrelevant to whom a person is, and surely we who take our faith seriously might rather think that religion should be the most important influence of all upon a person's life. It has been upon mine. You can not know or understand Ted Mosebach unless you understand what I believe about God.

These thoughts may raise two questions. First, how far then should the state be separated from the church, and second, what in particular about a politician's religion should we care? And as Protestant Christians we might add, what does the Bible say about these things?

Well, for one thing, Paul writes that Christians should be good citizens of the land in which they live and obedient to the civil laws and authorities. He goes so far as to say that civil government and those who administer it are instituted by God. In the thirteenth chapter of Romans he says that there is no authority except from God and that God has granted civil authority to some so that society could be peaceable and orderly for the

good of all. To strengthen the argument is to point out that Paul stated these ideas when he was a prisoner of Rome, the occupying oppressive foreign power of Paul's own nation of Israel, and he was a prisoner of Rome for no other reason but that he was a Christian. Paul had broken no laws of the Roman Empire and that would eventually be his defense. He submitted to the civil authority of Caesar but refused to worship him. Paul was not a rebel against Rome. He did not support taking up arms against the Roman occupiers. And even though he was suffering because of the Romans, they were still the civil authorities where he lived and he insisted that their laws and rulers should be respected.

The imprisonment Paul suffered was because there was a lack of separation between the church and the state in ancient Rome. If he was an American today, of course, he would not have been imprisoned. We American Christians are Constitutionally guaranteed not to be punished in any way by our civil authorities because of our religion. The first article of the Bill of Rights states: Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

To remember what happened to Paul and countless other Christian martyrs up to the present day, many giving their very lives for their faith or their particular understanding of Christianity, might cause us to cherish article one of the Bill of Rights. And if there be any chance of error in its application, by either not separating far enough the church from the state or by separating them from each other too far, we prefer to err on the side of the separation going too far. How horrible the situation has been in other lands when the separation between church and state was not wide enough!

When Peter and the apostles were taken before the High Priest, an authority at the time with judicial power to determine criminality for wrong religious belief and to punish it, Peter said, *we must obey God rather than any human authority.* (Acts 5:29) So there is this exception to the mandate for Christians to obey the authorities of the land in which they are living. If those authorities have broken their allegiance to God and enacted laws or used their power to require beliefs or behaviors which are contrary to our understanding of the will of God, then Christians are to obey God and disobey the human authorities. But then and only then. And the idea which Paul implies is that if we obey the civil authorities in every way that is right and good according to the values of Christ, most governments will not penalize us. There are exceptions, yes, but I think Paul would say, and pray, those exceptions are rare.

So, in this sense, is it a sin for Christians to break the civil law in some way. If the law is not contrary to the will of God, then, yes, I think it would be a sin to break it. A little while ago I was late for a meeting at the church one morning and coming down Main Street about fifty miles an hour. I knew the speed limit there is thirty five. A police officer stopped me. He said, "Do you have an excuse for going so fast?" I said, "none that's good enough." He gave me a break. I got off with a warning. He told me that he respected my honesty. At least I did not double my wrong by lying to him. But even if I had not been pulled over, was I sinning by knowingly driving over the speed limit? I think so, yes. The civil authorities are instituted by God. I disobeyed the law

which was duly enacted for the good of all. I was in need of the forgiveness of God as well as from the police officer.

Nevertheless, as much as we might want to keep them separate, and honor the authority of both, and I sure do, I also care very much about an elected politician's religion. I do not care so much about whatever the sect or denomination is to which a politician belongs, be that Protestant or Catholic or Independent Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or Mormon, as much as I care about whether he or she is a person of what might be described as true religion. Is the ultimate authority in his or her life a God of love and justice and mercy and peace? If a person claims no religion, then I wonder from where he or she gets his or her values, and what will be the considerations he or she uses to make decisions? I understand that in America politicians must promise to uphold the Constitution, but beyond that commitment I want to know what they hold dear. I might vote for someone who identifies him or herself as Christian, or Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Mormon (as ridiculous as Mormon theology is and, yes, it is a cult), as long as he or she is a person of true religion which teaches God's love and our love of neighbor. It seems to me that this is still consistent with the Constitutional mandate that there shall be no religious test for elected office. A politician can not be legally barred from holding office because of membership in any particular religious sect or denomination, or for having no religious affiliation, but I think that voters have a right to know who or what is in the lead of a politician's soul.

Once Jesus was given a Roman coin and asked if it was right for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome. And Jesus replied, *give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give unto God what belongs to God.* And so the world has always had the two, faith and politics, religion and government. The Bible says, and we might suppose it true anyway, that we have them both because we need them both, and as far as possible Christians are to honor both and be respectful of both. But Paul did not worship Caesar and we do not worship America, not the republic, not the democracy. For Christians it must be Christ first, and Christ always first, and then our politics will be republican, and democratic, and wise.