

NORTH COAST

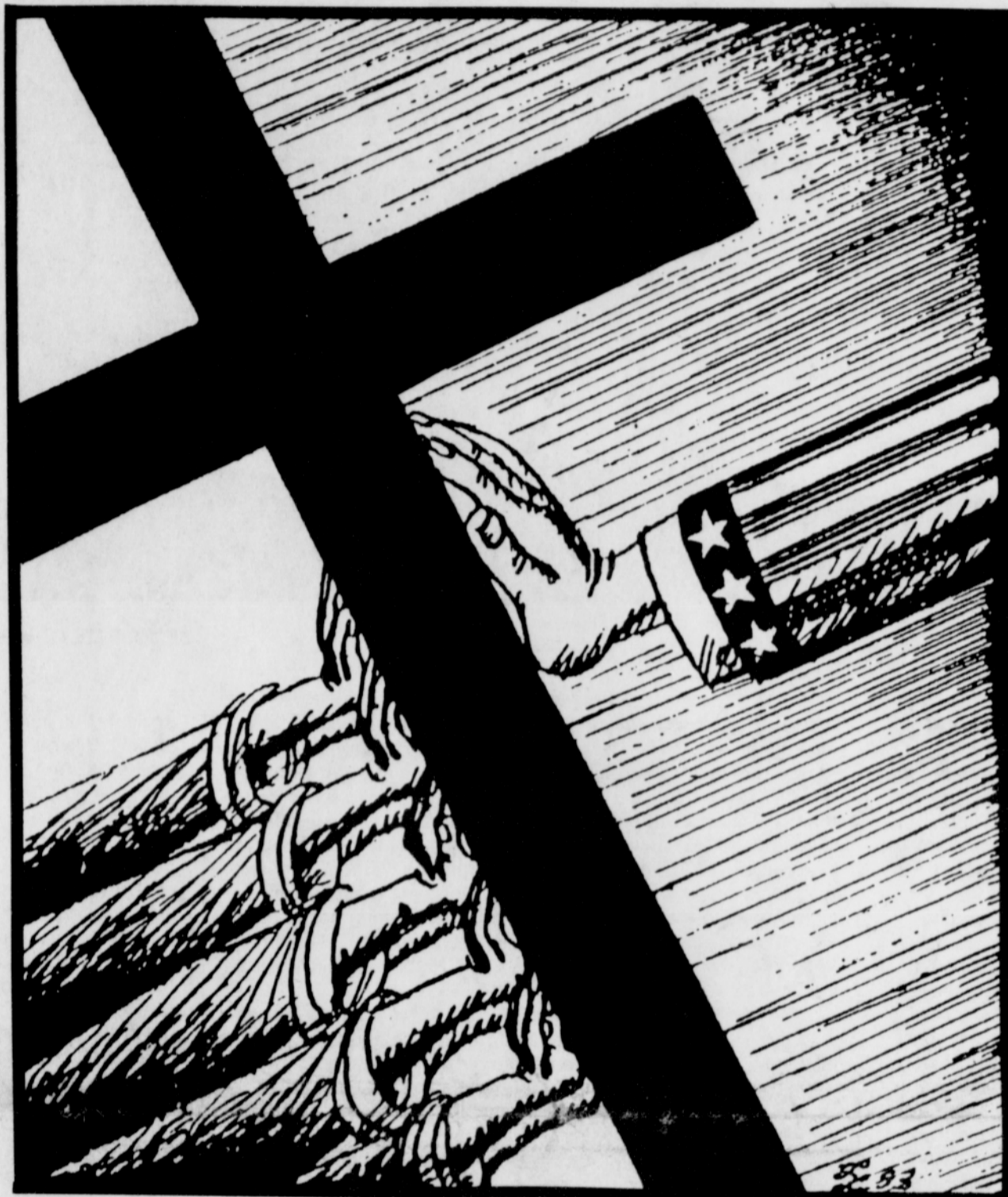


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In a dark time the eye begins to see.
- Theodore Roethke

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DRAWING BY LEONID LAMM

O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

Christmas, that pagan holiday appropriated from the followers of Odin, is a time for feast and fellowship, a convivial warmth against the cold winter ahead. It is a parochial celebration that affirms a civic Christianity as the national religion although the nation is the uneasy host for every conceivable form of theology. Usually the public piety is casual, indifferently observed, but occasionally the puritan past clamors for power, generally during periods of disruption and confusion such as the present when political ideologies imprint a grim, intolerant and despotic orthodoxy upon Constitutional law.

It might yet be difficult to accept willful ignorance and evangelical vengeance as the center of political direction and intellectual discourse but the anguish that underlies American culture is a schizophrenia unable to resolve material greed with spiritual piety. The political tolerance for a variety of religions that is assured in the nation's laws is probably due more to an awareness that no one sect has been powerful enough to rule over the others, and just to be sure, religion is not allowed to directly interfere with government except as inspiration and manifest destiny. The practical consequence of separation of church and state has been to protect each from the other.

By its own law the government cannot and should not enforce or impose any manner of worship or religion upon its citizens or any others who live in this country. It cannot attempt to regulate or interfere with religion or with anyone's choice of worship or choice not to. The current debate about church and state is less about religion than it is a dichotomy of political values between those who would impose a narrow doctrine of absolutes that are not to be questioned or resisted, only obeyed, and those who believe that everyone has the right and obligation to choose their own beliefs about what is right and wrong.

If the United States adopted or was forced to accept a single religion distinct from a loosely defined public creed other religions would be purged, in particular those that are not Christian. Races other than white would lose all of their already minimal civil rights, women would be shoved back into second class status, and most democratic freedoms would soon be suspended. The course of the current intrusion into politics by the religious right is less to glorify God than to manipulate religion as a conduit to political power and conversion of the government into a militant theocracy. If the religious conservatives who are clamoring for absolute control of the government succeed in changing the nation into an ecclesiastical state the result would be perpetual inquisition and religious war.

As precarious and brief as has been the history of political liberty, its only real opponent is the people's belief in a divine deity and their fear they might be immortal. Religion serves as handmaiden to political rule. From the beginning of

history humanity has evolved religions to explain life and its possible place within it, and always there has been the desire that life not end at the crypt. Religion has thus been a political instrument in every society, at once a source of philosophical inquiry and a political doctrine of identity and rule. By the very nature of the fear that produced it, religion is authoritarian and exacts servitude from its followers. The hope for life after life has served secular government. The misery of life can be borne steadfastly and in service to life's oppressors by the promise of rewards beyond earthly life, which it is not necessary to prove. The dilemma of where we rank in the cosmos has been narrowed considerably to serve the ambitions of a very few who, paradoxically, seem to reap all earthly rewards for the pious suppression of their followers and subjects.

It is double-edged: the use of religion for purposes of rule makes it essential to both regulate religion and inflict its doctrines upon government. The state supplants God but belief in God is necessary to support the state.

Nationalism is itself a virulent form of religion but its major disadvantage is that it cannot promise life after death. Great masses of citizens believe that the nation is an extension of divine rule, however, or is an acceptable substitute. They proclaim the same fervor toward a flag as towards a deity, and often confuse them.

American religious conservatives used to think the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, righteously denounced as the "Evil Empire," was the classical final confrontation between good and evil and would, through the use of nuclear weapons, result in the end of Earth. Now they must find other apocalyptic struggles between *God/Anti-God*, and they seem to be focused culturally inward, at gay people, assertive women and 3rd world immigrants who transport alien gods to these shores. The Christian conservative backlash is not simply the perception of the disintegration of society as the result of the deterioration of spiritual values but what they also perceive as a war against religion by the government, which in reality generally accommodates religious beliefs unless arguments against are compelling. Religious fundamentalists are rarely accommodating but instead exhibit malevolent contempt for dissent and refuse to accept that people who think differently might be sincere and even noble in their points of view.

True believers put a rather low priority on mortal life, which is only a process of mortification and putrescence to the rigorously faithful. They profess a distaste for life and secular knowledge. They despise what is known as humanism, which is simply an ethical and compassionate responsibility for being human but which is reviled as permissive heresy. They believe

that all who claim to be Christian must support every activity that fulfills biblical prophecy even if it destroys the rest of us. This of course would be the desired Armageddon and selection of souls. Good and evil would both be destroyed with the end of Earth, but good would return with the reappearance of Jesus Christ. Earth would be resurrected and repopulated with the souls of the faithful who would dwell for eternity in the joy they eschewed in life. Everyone would have to die for nirvana to be realized, and everything *homo civilis* has spent millennia to construct. It is ironic that the most grim, unbending, intolerant and ignorant are unshakably certain that only they are beloved by God. It is perhaps more ironic that one would have to willfully participate in the murder of life to be worthy of living forever.

Most religions are preoccupied with death, with shades and shadows, and with few exceptions they share apocalyptic visions of the end of Earth. A wonderful yearning of spirit and intellect is distorted into oppressive sets of scriptures that stifle the inquiry that originated religions. Questions are bent into rigid answers that must not be questioned. All religions demand their followers suspend the progress of knowledge and that nothing pertaining to theological doctrine be advanced beyond the period in which a particular religion was founded. Mythologies developed hundreds or thousands of years ago are taught as absolute certainties and subsequent learning is dismissed as heretical.

A distinction must be made between religion and spirituality. An atheist can be profoundly spiritual while a religious follower might only be so because of social pressures, ambition or as a result of fear, which is a greater draw to the pew than the boilerplated love of God. One does not have to prostrate before a disinterested deity to be moral. Morality is the conscience of humanistic behavior. In that sense most religions have seldom acted morally, and in this present era of inquisitorial fervor the political intent of religion is immoral.

The issue of church and state is much more serious than the tiresome ambitions and subversions of zealots and despots. Separation of church and state embodies all other disputes, ethnic, religious, racial and gender which have resulted in civil wars elsewhere in the world but are so far contained within the normal but very strained framework of American politics. Yet the middle ground of civility and reasonability is disappearing. Comparable to the slavery issue that preoccupied the first half of the 19th century, no matter how many compromises are erected to stall or prevent the outbreak of civil war, the confrontation between religious or secular dominance of the government seems to inevitably await solution in violence.

-MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER