Democracy and Religion

What, one might ask, is there to discuss about religion and democracy? We all know that the Constitution makes that clear by stating there is a wall of separation between church and state. Right? Wrong. No such language exists in our Constitution. In fact, there are democracies in other countries that are called *religious democracies*. A religious democracy is a form of government where the values of a particular religion affect laws and rules. There are some countries in which the head of state must belong to a certain religion. In our country, however, to qualify for the highest office a President merely has to pretend to be religious.

The Founding Fathers, in trying to create a government, were quite aware of the history of religion's corrosive effect of government, which persisted within the colonies themselves. Religion's influence in Europe was in good part the reason many early colonists had fled to our shores, only, in some cases, to establish their own intolerant religions. And religion's influence on government continued throughout our American history, and to this day.

The U.S. Constitution's First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof." It is called the "Establishment Clause." So, no State religion, and the State cannot stop you from practicing your religion. Of course, it's not quite that simple. There are those that insist that the Founding Fathers created a "Christian" nation, which suggests an unsanctioned but underlying State religion. And there are examples of government's efforts to influence religious practices that do not conform to the cultural mores of our democratic society, such as the passing of bigamy laws that brought about conformity by the Mormon Church. This push and pull between secular government advocates and religious government advocates is evident from a reading of our country's history.

With popularity comes power (and of course, money), and so it is the larger groups of congregants or believers that have the greatest influence on what we would call a secular (non-religious) government such as ours. In 1954, the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance (see essay on The Pledge in Commentary) The phrase "In God We Trust" had its first printing on U.S. currency in 1864 during the Lincoln Administration, but met with some resistance. It was not until 1955 that a law was passed that required it to appear on all currency. The following year the phrase was adopted as the motto of the U.S. Congress, replacing *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one") which had been the *de facto* motto since the creation of the Great Seal of the United States. And in our contemporary government, we have seen the influence of the Christian-right at the highest levels. George W. Bush held prayers at the beginning of his cabinet meetings, and a good segment of the supporters of President Trump are members of that same Christian-right. And in a Supreme Court case (Carson vs. Makin, decided 6-3) this year (2023) the court paved the way for public funds to flow to religious schools, the "Holy Grail" of religious organizations.

Despite the polls that show the fastest growing religious group are the "nones," that is, those who have no specific religious affiliation, which includes, atheists, agnostics, humanists, as well as those who state they are "spiritual but not religious," religious adherents, particularly those of the Christian faith, exert a good deal of influence on our government, an example of how being well organized helps get things done.

So, maybe you are a patriotic American who recites the Pledge of Allegiance and allows that your country is subordinate to a supreme being. Perhaps you can accept that the word *God* in "In God We Trust" could be a Christian God, or an ancient Greek God. But is there a circumstance when you should become concerned that religion is having an undue influence on the very democracy that protects it? For example, what if a religion's dogma insists that future world events are to be influenced by the United States, to, say for example, influence U.S. policy in the Middle East? Among Christians, one of the most well-known apocalyptic narratives is the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which tells the story of the defeat of an evil beast, a final divine judgment and the

coming of a New Jerusalem. While many biblical scholars read the book as a story about the destruction of corrupt political systems, many evangelical Christians believe it describes the rapture, Jesus' return to save believers from a period of tribulation. It is one thing to have a belief and another to steer fate. As comedian and movie producer Bill Maher states at the opening of his documentary film, *Religulous*, "The only thing I hate worse than a prophecy is a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Richard Waterman

For more on religion and its relationship on our country, read *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby