

4: Religion in American Public Life: Civil War to the Present

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When the Civil War began, the First Amendment was viewed as defining the role of the federal government, not the states. As a result, the federal government left the role of religion in public life to each state to decide individually. The War caused a shift in governance, with the federal government assuming greater authority over the states. The central government, however, remained small and limited the use of its expanding powers. It was a period of significant growth and change in the population due to large-scale immigration, and of rugged individualism with the activities of people and companies unfettered by many laws or regulations. Although social problems existed, America was viewed as a land of unbounded opportunities. Throughout this period, religion remained an important part of public life. Prayer and Bible readings were common in the schools, while Presidents frequently acknowledged the role of God in the nation's affairs. Abraham Lincoln, for example, in his Second Inaugural Address in 1865 as the Civil War raged, stated that God "gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due" for the long history of slavery.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, immigration continued at all-time highs, with the largest contingents coming from Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Poland. From 1880 to 1900, the Catholic population in America doubled to 12 million people. Industry and commerce increased at a great rate, and America was becoming a world power. As the immigrants grew in number, associations and societies were formed to meet their social and economic needs, including fraternal, literary, insurance, death-benefit, and burial. The Knights of Columbus, established in 1882, was one such organization.

The public schools included in their instruction general morality and the common tenets of faith common to all Christian religions. The American Catholic bishops viewed this teaching as primarily Protestant and a danger to the faith of Catholic youth. At the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, they decreed that "a parochial school must be erected at every church...All Catholic parents are obliged to send their offspring to parochial schools." As this was a heavy burden on the parishes, a variety of approaches to religious education were instituted in the following years, such as seeking state funds for the parochial schools or having religious instruction in the public schools before or after regular school hours. In the early years of the 20th century, the Catholic school system in the United States began to flourish.

With the Great Depression and the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President, there was another shift. The philosophy of the federal government changed from creating an environment in which people had opportunities to better themselves through diligent efforts and hard work to providing the basic necessities of life for people. The government created jobs, provided welfare and retirement programs, subsidized farmers, built highways, electrified rural areas, and regulated business, commerce, and communications. The government expanded its powers and size even more with the

nation's entry into World War II. The focus of the government's interest was primarily economic, and religion was not affected significantly.

Religion in public life remained strong. In many ways, the late 1940s and 1950s were characterized by a strong public morality that was compatible with Catholicism in America. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was a television star as he lectured on applied philosophy and theology, lightened by quips about his "angel." Large numbers of movies depicted nuns and priests as role models of virtue and goodness in everyday life, with Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald epitomizing Hollywood's lovable Irish priests. The film, "Our Lady of Fatima," was nominated for an Academy Award in 1952, while the openly Catholic Loretta Young hosted a nationally-viewed family TV show. And in 1947, 70,000 men marched in the Holy Name Parade in Boston, ending up in Fenway Park for Benediction.

Ironically, the high point of that era, the election of John F. Kennedy as President, the first Catholic to achieve that office, also marked another turning point: the emergence of Catholics who separated their private and public views of religion. Instead embracing their Faith to transform the culture of the United States, Catholics attempted to improve their material success by adapting to the secular world. In a campaign speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, on September 12, 1960, Kennedy said,

I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me. Whatever issue may come before me as President, if I should be elected, on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject, I will make my decision in accordance with these views -- in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.

In the past few decades, America has become the dominant nation in the world – economically, politically and militarily. As the nation gained power and the economy grew, people began to strive for greater personal materialism. Religion became less of a family priority. Prayer, Mass and the Sacraments were neglected. Catholic politicians felt they could increase their popular appeal by being opposed to the teachings of the Church, and Catholic voters paid little, if any, attention to the Church's moral positions when casting their ballots. With the continuance of these views, is it any wonder that even minimal adherence to religious matters is being swept away from public life?

Since his recent election, Pope Benedict XVI continues to speak of a crisis of culture, in which the Western nations are excluding God from the public conscience. This religious neutrality of the state, he says, is an illusion and will lead to dogmatism, for as we lose sight of God, human dignity will disappear. If one person through moral leadership rather than organizational rank – such as St. Paul, St. Francis, St. Theresa of Avila, and more recently Mother Theresa, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. – can have a significant effect on the world, imagine what 1.7 million members of the

Knights of Columbus, praying the rosary and living the teachings of our Faith in their daily public and private lives, can do.