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Just Thinking, 11/18/02:

The Loose Leg of Western Society's Table

by Justin Katz

Humans are basically flawed creatures. No group is, or will ever be, without sin – or depravity or error, to use secular terms. Unfortunately, when a group gains enough power, it will attract the type of people who are especially vulnerable to corruption. This isn't a negotiable reality: there will always be relationships of power; there will always be greed; there will always be injustice. Therefore, the question is not whether any social structure has proven incorruptible, but which offers the most barriers and correctives. Religion works well in this role precisely because it accepts the reality of God, an incorruptible, omnipotent entity external to human society.

However, religion is merely the divine component to society, and we do well to separate it from civil governance, mostly so that the specific power and influence that derive from each do not lie within the same corruptible person, limited group, or even area of interest. The Catholic Church, for example, is not an "empire" in the secular sense, and a large part of what allowed it to be so misappropriated in the past was that individuals attempted to treat it as such. This is the error that Muslim extremists are determined to make now, and the struggle within Islam over this push is underway.

Christians, as a whole, have learned the lesson. That is why it was Christians who created the civil practices that govern our society today. Civil law, as practiced in the United States of America, was not imposed upon religion, but grew from its principles. Christians aren't *held in check* by the law; they *follow* it. Consider that modern Muslim extremists live in the same world as do Christians. Where they can openly flout the international concept of human rights, they do so; where they cannot, they work by stealth. Equivalence between the two religions fails in this regard. The followers of Christianity have internalized the strategy of allocating different aspects of their lives to different authorities — although not all on the same plane, of course — and scriptural passages may be cited to undermine sectarian movements to the contrary (e.g., Mark 12:17, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”).

Undoubtedly, the Roman Catholic Church was in need of the changes wrought by the Reformation; undoubtedly, general changes in society have required growth in the human institution of the Church. However, it is also true that the ethic of individual sovereignty and value grows from Christianity. While the U.S. Constitution declares that “Congress shall make no law” in the area of religion, much in the founding of our government indicates a presumption of faith (“endowed by their Creator”). In short, Christians can simultaneously believe that moral standards ought to be followed and that civil government is not the route through which to enforce them.

This is, indeed, the central practical difference between Christianity and Sharia-based Islam. No Catholics are suggesting that the answer to Islamism is the institution of a theocracy based on Catholicism; they *are* suggesting that Western society should buttress its own Christian faith, which allows for the separate existence of civil law, of its own free will. In fact, I'd say the vast majority of Christians would be satisfied with general renewed faith in any religion that allows a social structure in which all are free to practice religion according to conscience — as well as to state publicly why they believe their own to be the closest to Truth.

People need to believe in something, and some will take those beliefs too far, even if they constitute, in essence, a faith in democratic principles, such as Justice, Freedom, and Reason, removed from any greater or underlying justification for them. James Lileks put it well in his November 2 Daily Bleat with respect to Democrat versus Republican politics: “the more you believe you can create heaven on earth the more likely you are to set up guillotines in the public square to hasten the process” (<http://www.lileks.com/bleats/archive/02/1102/110202.html#111202>). That includes secular utopias (take your pick: nationalism, communism, politically correct progressivism).

The question isn't whether one system of belief is free of the influence of human sinfulness, but which, again, has the most barriers and correctives. I would argue that faith in God offers the most intellectually consistent and practical solution. This is a question that looks to the future — toward improving on what has been done in error in the past — so history is of limited utility. Even so, history strongly suggests that, where atheism has reigned, so have affronts to humanity. While atrocities on a massive scale have not been done specifically “in the name” of Atheism, the influence of the atheist ethic has enabled those horrors that have been pursued by individual atheists and people persuaded by specific tenets of the non-belief system, even into our modern times. (And I don't just mean Communism, here.)

Faith, government, science, and so on are not comparable options; they are all components of society. That each brings its benefits to the table is something that society has had to learn, and the process of learning it bears a remarkable similarity to the evolution of Judeo-Christian theology. The great majority of believers in God are not seeking a return to theocracy. To win converts, they desire to work through persuasion and discourse. Radical Islamists do not share this organizational belief, and a Western society that has gone so far as to remove faith from its constitution will be unable to stand up to the battering ram of a single-minded ideology.