

Justin Katz

Timshel Literature

jkatz@timshelarts.com



www.timshelarts.com

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

401-835-7156

Just Thinking, 12/02/02:

The Beauty of Thanksgiving

by Justin Katz

In a 1996 column for *The Sunday Times of London*, British-born writer Andrew Sullivan declared that “on Thanksgiving, the Americans resolve the nationalist dilemma. They don’t celebrate themselves, they celebrate their good fortune.” There seems to have been something in the mixture of ideas that came together to form the United States that allows for such a balance. Americans can sparkle individuality and still be wary of blinding others. We can be religious without seeking to substitute religious fervor for nationalism.

Some might suggest that the respective “somethings” that enable these instances of balance are individual liberty and separation of church and state. Although these catch phrases go a step further than simply restating the conundrum, I do not believe that they capture the essence of its resolution. Unguided individual liberty yields no justification for broad altruism. To the extent that other areas of citizens’ lives do not impose their own bounds on license, the government will find it necessary to exert its influence.

As for “separation of church and state,” as it is meant in current usage, it is a doctrine proscribed many years after the particular “state” in question was formed. Polarization of government and religion is absent from the Constitution, is contrary to the statements of the Founders and national leadership throughout the country’s history, and, I would argue, is

dangerous to the health of America and Americans. To a large extent, the American experiment relies upon the existence of faith in a Creator, and it will falter if His influence on its citizenry is removed.

That Thanksgiving is a perfect example of the ahistorical nature of “separation of church and state” is perhaps only as surprising as the extent to which Americans seem to have forgotten the intent of the holiday. Those who trumpet the Constitutional mandate of the division would presumably be surprised by both, and I would count myself as proof that public schools are not inclined to rectify any false impressions. I don’t recall, ever in my twelve years in that system, much being made of the fact that it is God to whom we are supposed to be thankful.

Admittedly, teachers are in a tough position because we’ve forced on them a balancing act of their own: attempting to teach about a nationally sanctioned, religiously concerned holiday without mentioning God in such a way as to imply that He exists. Some teachers’ resources suggest teaching the relevant documents as a good way to skirt the issue. But such a strategy is only likely to be pursued by those teachers predisposed to follow it. Those who are not will concentrate on events before the United States existed as a political entity. The pilgrims, after all, were a private organization.

For lessons that would pursue the history of Thanksgiving beyond 1776, there are very many primary sources from which to choose. In its 1782 Thanksgiving Proclamation, the Continental Congress went so far as to “request the several States to *interpose their authority in appointing and commanding the observation* of... solemn THANKSGIVING to GOD... by promoting, each in his station, and by his influence, *the practice of true and undefiled religion*” (italics added; capitalization in original). In 1789, President George Washington declared that it was a “duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God [and] to obey his will,” calling Him “the great Lord and Ruler of Nations.” President Abraham Lincoln explained, in his

1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation, that “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things” for which we ought to show thanks, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, after quoting a Psalm, urged that the day in 1942 “be observed in prayer, *publicly and privately*” (italics added).

These and many other documents lay forth a clear precedent on the matter of the necessity of faith and the permissibility – even importance – of public officials’ expression of it. Yet, this issue is one of the larger examples of the way in which the only branch of government that is intended to be entirely restricted by precedent, the judiciary, has usurped the power of the legislature by “interpreting” the Constitution wrongly. This year, the legislature began action to restate its authority on such matters. In fact, the eleventh finding in support of the First Amendment Restoration Act, introduced by U.S. Representative Ron Paul (R., Texas), cites Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist’s 1984 dissent to *Wallace v. Jaffree*, which abolished school prayer. Justice Rehnquist makes reference to Thanksgiving and states, “History must judge whether it was the Father of his Country in 1789, or a majority of the Court today, which has strayed from the meaning of the Establishment Clause.”

It is fitting, then, that a corruption of the balance in our system of government was the catalyst to corrupt the broader balance that has made the United States – both the most free and the most religious nation in the world – such a marvel. A miracle, even. The unique and critical “something” is the balance in our society and in our individual lives: to each area of life its own influence in its own capacity and on the larger whole. Thus, government must enable the growth in faith whichever way it goes for the individual, and religion must inform the decisions and direction of government.

Of the Fourth of July, Andrew Sullivan wrote that it “displays a slightly neurotic excess of patriotism.” That is because that holiday is about us, not something greater. America is a nation

of freedom, but freedom informed by a higher purpose than a civil structure. On the Fourth of July, we raise up our political organization, which can only be in opposition to other nations. Dangerous ground.

Americans wish for the entire world to celebrate freedom together. We prefer to say, “you can share in this.” On Thanksgiving, we raise up a feeling that can be shared with the entire world without diminishing our own stock. Thanksgiving is a religious holiday marking a unique blend of faith with a dictate to step carefully around the issue in government. Those who would push separation of church and state as if it meant separation of God and people would take the strength, the beauty, from our nation. The beauty of Thanksgiving.