

When Politics and Religion were Mixed Thoroughly

By Dave Leach

“Never mix politics and religion”, we are advised.

Never? Wouldn't that depend on the religion in the mix?

Before you answer, you might want to know about one time when politics and religion were mixed thoroughly.

It was not just any ordinary religion.

It was Christianity, but it was no ordinary Christianity.

It was a sect of Christianity with a level of individual liberty not seen in the world for over a thousand years, until a generation or two before this mixing was done, and which lost its majority status even in the community which mixed it, only a generation or two after the mixing.

The year was 1620.

The place was the cold cabin of the Mayflower, anchored a mile and a half from Plymouth Rock.

The document they signed, giving birth to what we today call “freedom”, is called the Mayflower Compact.

What is so significant about this simple, 200 word charter which says nothing about presidents, courts, or lawmakers?

It's not only what it says, but also who signed it. It pledged signers to cooperate in forming their own government, which was unthinkable enough for subjects of a king. Then it invited *all* men to sign. Not just church members, but nonmembers. Not just free men, but servants. Not just the rich, but the poor. Not just nobles, but commoners. The least signed alongside the greatest.

Not even just men, but all heads of household. Although there were no female heads of household in 1620, Elizabeth Warren was allowed to vote after her husband Richard (my ancestor) died in 1627, leaving her with 7 children.

Not only did all participate in managing their government, but they had Freedom of Speech to discuss and criticize the leaders they chose.

Each one of these innovations had been unthinkable in any government, church or civil, for centuries. Some argue that events pressured the Pilgrims to experiment with freedom for their own survival, but freedom has always enhanced survival, without persuading the world to adopt it for so slight an incentive. The Jamestown colonists in 1607 dropped off like flies because the “nobles” wouldn't work alongside their servants, but that didn't persuade them to try Freedom.

Why wasn't Freedom – equality for all – unthinkable at Plimoth? Because for a generation, they had seen it work very well in their church. Not only did all church members have an equal voice in the selection of their own pastors, but they enjoyed Freedom of Religious Expression through a “prophesying service”, in which members freely discussed the Bible, and sometimes its application to current individual and community problems they were facing. Their services were like the services described in 1 Corinthians 14. Their European pastor, John Robinson, based it on Acts 13:14.

During that brief window of opportunity while Freedom of Religious Expression and Equality for All was the dominant theology in a relatively independent community, a government was born as

free as the theology which birthed it. Although the mother theology is now a tiny minority rejected by over 99% of Christians, the government inspired all the governments of America.

Over the centuries, it was that free government, directly, and the theology that birthed it, indirectly, that inspired most nations to throw off their absolute monarchs and try out various levels of freedom. It inspired most world religions, beginning with Christian denominations, to stop persecuting “hereticks”. (The Greek word actually means someone who divides churches, not someone with unacceptable doctrines. Freedom of Conscience is enshrined in Romans 2 and 12.)

There is no such thing as politics unmixed with religion. Politics is a community’s choice what to criminalize, and what to protect. These choices are unavoidably based on notions of right and wrong. Positions on what is right and wrong are taken by religions. To the extent Christians keep their faith out of the mix, politics will mix with other theories of right and wrong. Therefore, to not “mix” your faith with your politics is to not let your light shine.

Fortunately that was not the choice of the Pilgrims, in 1620.

I interviewed the world’s experts on exactly what happened in that Mayflower cabin in 1620, and what is significant about it, at the triennial Mayflower Society Congress Sept 6-9, where I was a delegate from Iowa where I serve as Elder. If you would like a DVD of those interviews, write to: Music@Saltshaker.US. Donation appreciated but not required.