

## Gerson, O'Donnell & the First Amendment

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Christine O'Donnell now claims that she thought she had bested her opponent Chris Coons in their discussion of the Constitution, during which she asserted that the separation of church and state was not found in that founding document. To be sure, the phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the text of the First, or any other, Amendment, but it is there. As Michael Gerson writes in [this morning's Washington Post](#) [1], the real problem is that O'Donnell "seems unmotivated by any strong, developed views of the Constitution." Ya think?

As far as I can tell, Ms. O'Donnell has a fetish for celebrity, an unquenchable thirst for the attention of the camera, but, unlucky for her, she was not born into wealth like Paris Hilton or married into it like Anna Nicole Smith. O'Donnell wants to be famous for being famous. To say that she lacks the gravitas, the "developed views," to hold public office is like saying my St. Bernard Ambrose lacks the delicacy for figure skating. It is true, in its way, but its way is absurd. St. Bernard's are existentially incapable of delicacy and Ms. O'Donnell is existentially incapable of intellectual depth. She seems like a nice person and I wouldn't mind having her as a neighbor, but she does not belong in the U.S. Senate.

Gerson's article goes on to make a very interesting point that touches on the differences and overlaps between the Tea Party movement and social conservatism. He cites a recent American Values Survey that found that 55 percent of the Tea Party members believe "America has always been and is currently a Christian nation." Only 49 percent of Christian conservatives agree with that statement. So, although the Tea Party membership is less religiously active or religiously motivated than Christian conservatives, a higher percentage of their members believe America is a Christian nation.

The "Christian nation" issue has been around for a long time. When he founded the Moral Majority in 1979, the Rev. Jerry Falwell tried to steer clear of such language. Part of the Moral Majority's program was to unite conservative evangelicals with conservative Catholics, conservative Mormons and conservative Jews, three groups that for different reasons objected to the "Christian nation" formulation. That said, Falwell and his followers definitely believed that America had a unique providential mission, of which Ronald Reagan spoke when he invoked the "shining city on a hill" metaphor for the nation, adding a splendidly Californian touch "shining" to the original image of a city on a hill invoked by John Winthrop. No matter the demographics or the constitutional niceties, in that providential vision, America is a distinctly Godly nation, and for most Americans, the face of God is Christ. Evangelicals then, like Tea Partiers today, sometimes get the distinctions confused and even Falwell, who repeatedly said he did not subscribe to the view that America was a Christian nation, would at times have a slip of the tongue and say precisely that.

It is easy to see why secular Americans object to the "Christian America" formulation. But, Christians should reject it too. If, as St. Paul tells us, "In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible. All were created through him; all were created for him," then every nation is a "Christian nation." The sign of the cross is not co-existent exclusively with "made in America."

Gerson, being Gerson, sows a little confusion of his own. He writes, "Since humans are autonomous moral

beings created in God's image, freedom of conscience is essential to their dignity. And so it is. But, 'autonomy' is not a Christian virtue; radical dependence on God is a Christian virtue. And, the faith which rightly esteems the role of conscience also rightly insists that what we do as Christians affects everyone else. Gerson, and the mainstream Protestant religious expression that has so profoundly shaped American history and culture for which he speaks, misses the communitarian aspect of Christianity.

Gerson also writes, 'Nearly all the most important teachings of faith ' doctrines on individual salvation or the destination of history ' have no public role or relevance.' Really? I suspect his views on 'autonomy' have something to do with Protestant beliefs about the individual priesthood of all believers. The ways that Protestantism has shaped American public life are many and profound, or else we would not even be having this conversation. And, it is one of the horrifying consequences of the Reformation that important ideas like freedom and conscience have been divorced from ideas about religious truth. I understand that the absence of ontology can, and has been at times, a spiritual and political blessing. But, still, reading Gerson's article I was reminded of the way A. Bartlett Giamatti used to call the 'Protestant Reformation' the 'Protestant Deformation.'

I like Gerson's writings and he is much more profound than the usual fare one finds on the op-ed pages of the nation's leading newspapers. But, the biases of his Protestantism are evident. They may be different from, and more sophisticated than, the biases exhibited by Ms. O'Donnell, but they are biases nonetheless.

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