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Prothero on Religion & Politics

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Stephen Prothero is one of America's leading scholars on the relationship between religion and politics. I have long agreed with him that Americans suffer from a religious illiteracy ? and other forms of cultural illiteracy, of the kind that invites ideologues to prosper. There is a moral obligation to be intelligent, and this requires anyone really interested in American history to be religiously literate or else they will greatly misunderstand the American story. And, so, I eagerly read his new essay at Religion & Politics, the nifty website sponsored by the Danforth Center at Washington University in St. Louis. Full Disclosure: I am on the editorial advisory board at R & P.

Yet, I disagree with Prothero on some of the issues he discusses and, most importantly, think he is using the wrong lens with which to view the issue. Essentially, his argument is that there is too much politics in religion and too much religion in politics.

As an example of too much entanglement, Prothero points to a sign put up at the First Baptist Church of West Harwich, Massachusetts before the election that read, "Scott Brown He's For Us," a sign at Corpus Christi Parish in Sandwich, Massachusetts opposing the ballot initiative on physician assisted suicide, and Rev. Billy Graham's endorsement of Mitt Romney during the last campaign. Prothero writes that the pastor at the Baptist Church removed the pro-Scott Brown sign when he was informed it was illegal, he thinks the sign at the Catholic Church was legal, and he thinks Rev. Graham crossed the line and that they should lose their tax exempt status.

I have written before about the prohibition on religious groups, and all non-profits, abstaining from partisan activity in a print issue of NCR last December. The prohibition entered the federal tax code without any congressional hearings, as a floor amendment from Lyndon Johnson, and it was aimed not at

the churches but at a non-profit in Texas that had campaigned against Johnson's re-election. It has never been challenged in the courts because it has never been enforced. No politician, as Prothero notes, wants to charge Billy Graham with breaking the law. Still, the law should be changed or challenged. And, I disagree with Prothero that Graham should lose his tax exempt status.

Prothero notes, to his credit, that the issue is complicated, observing that Sarah Palin defended her use of religious language on the political stump by invoking the precedent of Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Prothero writes: "Palin has a point. If we are going to laud the Rev. King for making the nation less imperfect then we cannot in principle object to Rev. Graham's effort to make it less Democratic." The words "in principle" are key. Many of my Catholic friends on the Left objected to the bishops' involvement in the last election, but not the "Nuns on the Bus." Seeing as I view women religious as leaders of our Church as well as bishops, I must find a better rationale than "well, they agree with me" to fault one and not the other. Too often, such basic norms of moral analysis are lacking.

But, my real problem with Prothero is his sense that there is a "middle path" to be discerned and followed. He concludes his essay with these words:

The American story of the relationship between church and state is a story of pendulum swings. In the last two of these swings, Earl Warren's Supreme Court made the country far more secular during the 1950s and 1960s, and the Religious Right made it far more religious during the 1980s and beyond. The 2012 election was a wake-up call for the nation on matters of racial and ethnic diversity. It might also just embolden us to push the church/state pendulum back closer to the middle, where it belongs.

I am not sure this is right. The Earl Warren Court certainly made our laws more secular, overemphasizing the Establishment Clause at the expense of the Free Exercise Clause. But, did the Warren Court really make "the country far more secular"? Does a process as profound and complicated as secularization really happen because there are no more crèches on the town square at Christmas, or prayer in the schools? I suspect the principal culprit in the rapid secularization of our society was affluence. After all, the Lord comforts the broken-hearted, not the self-satisfied suburbanite with all the creature comforts a person can buy. Israel turned to the Lord, and the Lord looked kindly on Israel, when she was afflicted. Prosperity, and the resulting lack of concern for the Lord, always brought ruin upon Israel.

I also think the Religious Right made our politics, not our country, more religious. It galvanized a group of otherwise withdrawn citizens and brought them and their concerns into the public square. We may not like Jerry Falwell's politics, but he is to be commended for culturally enfranchising millions of our fellow citizens.

Most of all, I do not think what we need is some hard-to-grasp, mythical "center," so much as a method. The key question is not whether there is too much or too little involvement of politics with religion: Both concern themselves with the human person so overlap is impossible. The key question is one of method. How should religious leaders engage the culture? How should politics engage religion? I think Rev. Graham should not have endorsed Mr. Romney, but not because of a provision in the tax code. I think he should not have endorsed him because there is a certain presumption of political expertise in such an endorsement.

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I do not fault Dr. King for leading a political movement, but one of the hallmarks of an authentically Christian political movement is that it is charitable, and that when there is conflict, as conflict there will

be, it is the leaders who expose themselves to suffering. There is something chilling about the way some of our Catholic pastors have breezily spoken about closing down ministries during the debate about the HHS mandate. How does such talk inspire the people who work at those ministries, people who day in and day out, making much less than they could elsewhere, bring the healing hands of Jesus to our broken world?

The first question for a pastor who is thinking of engaging in politics is not what affect such engagement will have on politics, but what such engagement will have on the church. For Catholics, who put such a premium on the unity of the Church, this is an especially urgent question: The Catholic Church in this country did not split in two during the Civil War, like so many Protestant churches did, and that says something important about the Catholic Church, something I think we all really value about our Church. The unity of the Church is more important than any particular moral position, any given political campaign, because we believe it is willed by Jesus Christ: Ut Unum Sint. I don't suspect our friends at the Heritage Foundation or the Center for American Progress care much about the unity of the Church, which is why the pastors of the Church should always be wary of the political advice of those with a vested interest in enlisting the Church's support on any given issue.

The Church must find a way to engage the political culture, but it must also look for ways to keep its distance. And, given the rules of the road in post-Reformation culture, engagement is difficult, it is done on terms the Church does not set, and it often invites us to do what we cannot do, to privatize our religion. Again, I refer the readers to Brad Gregory's magisterial work, "The Unintended Reformation," which demonstrates that the issue is not between Democrats and Republicans, but between a modern post-Reformation culture and a Church that understands herself in different, non-modern terms.

Prothero's essay is important, but it only scratches the surface and he frames the issue wrongly - it is not a question of more or less religion in politics, or politics in religion, but how religion and politics interact. Indeed, you could say that "Distinctly Catholic" is an on-going attempt to wrestle with what is below that surface. I, too, am still finding new ways of looking at this central conundrum of our culture. But, one thing I know: Once you concern yourself with the estuary where religion and politics meet, nothing else seems as complicated, engaging, multi-faceted, historically conditioned, and theologically challenging, as this estuary does and I am blest to be swimming in it with people as smart as Stephen Prothero.

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