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## Oh no, not that again

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

Perhaps there is no better window for an American citizen to have on the United States than to see it at a distance. Being in Europe is particularly fascinating because, except for the architecture in the old cities, we all look so much alike.

Western lifestyle has a kind of commonality about it from end to the other, from Los Angeles, to London, to Moscow. Everything is similar, if for no other reason than that the United States has managed to export its culture more efficiently than any other people since ancient Rome.

Whatever the national dress of other periods, most of that is saved for national holidays now. There are a few high hats and knee breeches left in Ireland around St. Patrick's day and some embroidered suspenders and vests in Germany around Christmas but for the most part, there's a single international uniform for teenagers now -- jeans and Nike's, NFL T-shirts and sandals -- and for adults, as well.

We eat the same foods, watch the same movies, dance to the same music and follow the same TV shows.

One major difference, perhaps, is that in Europe no one asks a political candidate what religion they are or speculate how it will affect their chances for election, which is very interesting, when you think about it. This, after all, is "the seat of Christendom" but Christendom does not run for office here.

In the United States, on the other hand, the political headlines read like a church bulletin: "Faith, Politics Cross in Immigration Debate" (*Dallas Morning News*), " Religious, Secular Leaders Urged to Unite," (*Austin-American Statesman*) and in this week's *New York Times*, "Mormon Candidate Braces for Religion As Issue,"

This same week, the death of Robert Drinan, S.J., the first elected priest to the United States Congress and the man who entered the first call for the impeachment of Richard Nixon, raises the question again here. What is the place of religion in U.S. politics?

Interestingly enough, the country founded to provide freedom of religion for all its citizens, to protect the church from repression by the state, to outlaw the very idea of an establishment church that had been the ruination of so much of Europe, the country that set out to erect a wall between church and state, is the country that today struggles with the issue most of all.

The problem pointed up by Pope John Paul II in his directive that priests and nuns should not be involved in politics is the mirror image of the concern raised at the time of the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for the presidency of the United States.

Then, the worry was that Kennedy would be required to do what the Catholic church required of him, whatever the position of other faiths on those same issues.

John Paul II's concern, quite correct history would say, was just the opposite. His fear was that priest-politicians, as agents of the state, would be required to follow the dictates of the state rather than the requirements of conscience in moral matters. He knew that the entanglement could be a fatal one. He knew, too, as does any amateur student of history, that priests in politics have always been a deadly brew, for church and state alike.

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The fact is that religion in the modern world is to be a challenge to the conscience of the country, not a tool of the state. The democratic political process, on the other hand, is to seek the common good, not to impose one religious institution's morality on another. To keep the balance between the two positions, it must, at the same time, protect the right of every religious community to call the government to consider in its legislative process what is morally right for the country rather than simply what is expedient for it.

To question the morality, the justice, of any social position, to advocate for social reform of any issue is a religious imperative. To trap politicians into committing themselves to one church agenda rather than another, however, will, in the end, be damaging to the faith itself.

Religion is neither a servant nor an enemy of the state. The separation of church and state is not about the

suppression of religious interests. It is about the protection of religious differences.

When candidates for political office promise commitment to anything other than the common good, the protection of all religions is in danger. When candidates bring a religious agenda to the office, they offend the constitution they are pledged to uphold. When churches lobby for legislation inimical to the faith of others or support candidates on the basis of their religious beliefs, they threaten the balance between democracy and theocracy.

The "family values" agenda of these last years has come dangerously close to dividing morality itself, as if some issues essential to the dignity and well-being of a family were family values but others were not. Family values are all the values that protect the full humanity of the citizenry, not simply the sexual aspects of life. Politicians, in many cases, did a much better job of realizing the moral import of multiple issues -- the minimum wage, human and civil rights, equality, war and global warming, as well as stem cell research and civil unions -- than did many a church leader.

Let's hope the new crop of headlines does not mean that we're about to have another national election based on only a few particular issues and call that religion and morality. It's not only tiresome. It may be immoral.

Europe seems to be doing just as well -- or better -- than we are on some moral issues. They seem much more devoted to saving the globe, for instance, than we are. And they never even ask their candidates what religion they are. Let alone how they'll vote as a result of it.

From where I stand, that seems to be a very good way to go. In fact, how did we ever get away from it in the first place?

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