

editorials

Religious Expression in the Public Square

There is no *the* public square. There are, however, at least two *types* of public squares. The one is formally established, which means that it is at least implicitly tax-supported by citizens of all stripes and creeds. The other is informal, and refers to public spaces and times in which law and tax-support are not involved.

Most battles over religion in the public square deal with the first sort. The major institutions involved are public schools, from kindergarten through post-doctoral; the courts and courthouse walls and lawns; and bits and pieces of artifacts that represent public transactions, such as coins and bills and postage stamps.

Most public space is of the second sort. The lawn in front of my house and thousands of other lawns are part of the public square. I can put crèches and Ten Commandment sculptures, menorahs and posters in such places, limited only by zoning laws about all kinds of displays, religion not excepted but not singled out. Similarly, the worlds of entertainment and advertising, malls and halls, the most noisy, blatant, and obvious instrumentalities for reaching publics, ordinarily can be seen as "private" engagements with "public" space. No one except some customers would protest if Budweiser in its Christmas commercials said "Christ is Born!" Budweiser does not do that, because it does not

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Several years ago a local Lutheran parish was in an uproar. A well-intentioned group suggested to the worship board that the flag of the United States of America and the Christian flag be moved from the front to the rear of the nave. It made good liturgical sense to do so, they thought. However, after the flags were moved, a hubbub ensued. The congregation's many veterans were outraged. Who dare move the flags? We are a nation "under God," they said. To them the flags were a reminder of lives sacrificed and limbs lost to preserve our country's freedom to worship God without prohibition or interference.

Cooler heads prevailed. The flags were returned to the front of the nave. This was a matter of *adiaphora*, not doctrine, and the uproar subsided. Though minor in comparison to other debates on religious expression in the public square, the congregation's immediate polarity on the location of the flag of our country in its worship space is an example of the passion aroused over matters of the relationship between church and state. It is *not* a neutral matter!

This edition of *Issues* serves as a discussion starter and mind expander on some weighty issues challenging Christians as we seek to live out our lives in the now but not yet of the Kingdom of God.

To that end, Dr. Martin Marty reminds us that Americans have favored a "'messy' arrangement" that often fails to draw hard lines between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. Dr. Russell Moulds helps to clarify "the two kingdoms" through which Lutherans understand appropriately the role of the church and the role of civil authority and then provides some helpful "implications to keep in mind when thinking about God's 'left hand' and 'right hand' in the public square." Dr. David Lumpp provides a historical overview of the role The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and its members have played and continue to play in the public square. Finally, Mr. Tim Butz surprises us (perhaps) as he describes numerous ways in which the American Civil Liberties Union has set about to preserve and defend *religious* liberty in the United States.

As each of us continues to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," may the public square be where we faithfully and constantly proclaim and live out the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord of all.

Brian Friedrich, President

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want to alienate any potential customers or shareholders. It knows something about the taste, diversity, and interests of the “publics” that make up the public, something that agitators for such signage in public schools and public buildings try to obscure.

On one level, it is easy to keep the two spheres within the squares distinct, and to demarcate where religious symbols, prayers, and events are in place and where they are not. In real life, however, it is hard to draw the lines. For the most part, Americans have favored what I call a “messy” arrangement. We do not ordinarily protest if a new religious congregation rents unused space in a public school for Sunday worship, although as Americans get ever more uptight and mistrustful, some have begun to dissent. Most of us do not wake up in the morning disturbed that “In God We Trust” is on our coins, and most of us would get interested if there were formal moves to remove the words. The vast majority of citizens do not protest tax-exemption on church property, and a candidate for Congress threatening to remove such exemption would stand no chance of being elected.

Why are we so jumpy about some public expressions, such as the words “under God” inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, compulsorily recited in schools? Why are both sides so angry about the intrusion of sculpted Ten Commandments in courts? For some, the presence of these words and symbols assure that the once-dominant and still-favored religion be officially recognized as the one true civil faith. For others, the same presence says, “We belong and you don’t.” The issue is especially sensitive for children of parents who are not part of the majority “Jewish” and “Christian” lineage. What does it say to the Hindu child to read the First Commandment, which is against their god(s), or the Buddhist, who is religious in a religion-without-God?

As one who “is religious,” whatever that means—it’s not a very good Lutheran phrase!—and who celebrates the Holy Trinity and the name of “the human Jesus who is the exalted Lord,” I am in the company of those who welcome it when artists in museums express their Christian faith, when musicians play and sing great Christian music. And I am emphatic about the understanding that legally privileged and imposed forms of religion *hurt* religion. They make faith an instrument of national expression and citizen exclusion.

No, there is no reason to insist that the Supreme Court cannot open sessions without a historic shout that God should save the Court. Military chaplains and people in kin professions draw tax funds, but there are ways to justify this.

Where I put energies into what we might call the positive expression of religion in the

public square has to do with drawing the line in schools between educating and worship, or in school concerts between performance and worship. Anything the government does to put its potentially lethal power behind any imposition that this or that God, *Our God*, is the only one, and that the Truth of this God has to be taught as the truth about life for all, strikes me as counterproductive and in the end a sign of a lack of faith in the power, in our case, of the Gospel, freely proclaimed.

So I want to see teaching *about* religion—not a happy phrase but a useful idea—taught in public schools. I welcome teaching about biblical teaching, though one risks bad teaching and must allow for teaching about other religions. How can we be informed world citizens without knowing about why and how people are religious if our schools are dumb, silent, about the subject? As for performance, I love to go to public high school madrigal concerts which include Christian classics from Mozart and Bach and contemporaries, and not leave it all to “Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer.” We have to teach publics that such presentations are performances, not acts of worship—though anyone is free to convert the performance to worship in their own minds.

What we need is more patience with each other, more faith in faith freely expressed, more awareness of the sensibilities of religious minorities, and less political distorting from all sides of something so noble and precious as faith.

Dr. Martin E. Marty

Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service
Professor Emeritus
University of Chicago

The Church in the Public Square

“God makes a preferential option for the poor.” That phrase, commonly used in some Roman Catholic circles, has troubled my students upon first hearing. They perceive it to say that God loves poor people more than the wealthy. For those of us who utilize a two-kingdoms understanding of God’s work in the world, a “preferential option for the poor” is not appropriate for God’s kingdom of the right hand—God’s grace and forgiveness. However, as God’s people examine their life in the kingdom of the left hand, the kingdom of power, a “preferential option for the poor” is indeed a sound attitude for analysis and action.

Traditionally, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been reluctant to involve itself in matters of God’s kingdom of the left hand—matters of public policy. Part of that hesitancy was an understandable reac-

tion to liberal, Social Gospel tendencies in Protestantism during the late 1800s and early 1900s which focused the church’s message on the “left hand” kingdom. The Missouri Synod spoke more openly on political matters in the 1960s and early 1970s, but later limited its concern to “family-values” issues.

As we address the question of church involvement in the public square, it is vital to emphasize that the kingdom of God’s left hand is *God’s* kingdom. Scripture reveals the intensity of God’s desire for a society reflecting justice and compassion. As God’s people, the church ought to take a strong interest in politics and economics.

God provides a clear vision for a healthy society, and it indeed makes a “preferential option for the poor.” Old Testament laws stipulate that landowners reserve portions of their harvests for the “widows, orphans, and foreigners” (i.e., the poor and marginalized folks). Israelites were to forgive debts periodically and to return lands to their original owners every fifty years. The Psalms identify God as one “who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry” (146:7). The commendable political leader has compassion on the needy, defends them, and delivers them from oppression (Psalm 72, Jeremiah 22:16). The writer of Proverbs urges God’s people to “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

God is a passionate partisan of the poor and oppressed. God deeply cares about the welfare of all people during their sojourn on earth. Presbyterian leader George Chauncey states, “. . . God judges nations by the standard of justice. The divine standard is not the size of a nation’s gross national product, the beauty of its places of worship, or the frequency of its prayer breakfasts. The divine standard is justice—which first and foremost means how a nation deals with the weak, the needy, and the vulnerable.” The critical question for a society is, according to Chauncey, “What is happening to the poor?”

Our affluent nation has had persistently high poverty rates—over 12 percent of all families in 2003, and over 28 percent of female-headed households. Over 36 million United States citizens experience hunger or are at risk of being hungry. Worldwide over 800 million people are undernourished. The World Bank estimates that about one in five people on our planet lives on less than a dollar a day. In 2000 every fourteen seconds one child became an orphan due to AIDS. God’s people, as individuals and as a group, cannot be indifferent to these and other harsh realities in today’s world. Instead, God calls us to respond and to act, addressing political and economic issues in the public square.

When the church addresses such questions, it must do so with wisdom and discernment. It cannot presume to possess the correct solution to poverty in terms of public policy. Missouri Synod pastor and hunger advocate, Arthur Simon, cautions that there is an enormous gap between a divinely revealed principle in Scripture and specific ways to implement that in the laws of a nation. The church should approach such issues with humility and with openness to a variety of legislative options. Nevertheless, the church needs to speak to these glaring violations of God's vision for a just and productive society. Otherwise, its silence is complicity.

God's "preferential option for the poor" provides us Christians with a challenging principle as we analyze and assess the society in which we live. It is a call to live responsibly and with integrity as participants in God's kingdom of the left hand.

Dr. Jerrald Pfabe
Professor of History
Concordia University, Nebraska

Defense of the Faith or Engagement with the World: Keeping the Two Kingdoms in Perspective

In 1989, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon authored a provocative little book entitled *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. In it they argued that American Christians now live in a post-Christian, post-Constantinian society. The church is no longer able to dominate society as an established and central institution. Rather, the church is to recognize itself as a community of pilgrims in this world, "resident aliens." They encouraged their readers to learn from the example of the 16th century Anabaptists, and their descendants such as the Mennonites, who had developed this perspective on the relationship between church and society. This was the "sect" type of Christian social orientation as discussed by Ernst Troeltsch in his monumental work, *The Social Teachings of The Christian Churches*. He contrasted this "sect" type with the society-embracing "church" type and claimed that both had a basis in New Testament Scripture. He argued that the sect type with its world-rejecting orientation appealed more to the poor and tended doctrinally to be associated with legalism. The church type, on the other hand, relied on the upper classes and inclined toward worldliness.

The nature of the church's relationship with society and the social character of the

church are central questions for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as it wrestles with its identity as a post-immigrant denomination in a post-denominational society. How are we to relate to the world? Are we to retreat from the world and our cultural context in a sectarian way, or are we to engage the world on its own terms? What is the best way to defend the faith and pass it to the next generation? How are we to evangelize in a radically secular multicultural society?

Luther developed his understanding of the two kingdoms in the *Sturm und Drang* of 16th century Germany. His clear articulation of separate spheres of responsibility between church and state was to some degree fatally compromised by the institution of the state church in Germany and Scandinavia. Rather than being a world-denying sect, Lutheran churches became pillars of the establishment with all the temptations to worldly compromise entailed by that connection. Lutheranism continues to be primarily a church of the middle class, rather than the poor, though there are a few enormous Lutheran churches in Africa that may change that character. Now we stand at a time in history where the establishment has de-established the church. We face the reality of a radically secularized public square and the fact that our members' denominational identity is no longer rooted in community and is therefore no longer firm or lifelong.

The response of the Saxon immigrants to the Prussian Union was to adopt a sectarian response to the world and raise the barriers to keep it out. In many ways, we in the LCMS have benefited from that impulse in the building of our system of Lutheran schools and colleges and our relative success in maintaining an orthodox confession. The danger of worldliness which the sectarian impulse resists is a real one, especially in our secularized society.

Yet, the sectarian impulse also can lead to legalism and a failure to communicate the Gospel message to the world. Somehow we must balance the need to keep ourselves pure and unstained from the world with the need to be "all things to all men so that by all possible means (we) might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). A proper understanding of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine can help us maintain that balance.

As Lutherans, we must avoid the extremes of legalism and sectarianism but must maintain a sharp enough boundary between church and world to guard against worldliness and sustain and nurture the faith. The Protestant mainline churches have failed precisely because they have allowed the world to flood into the church, and there is with them no longer a clear distinction between church and world. This danger must be avoided as lethal to the Christian faith. On the other hand, some are tempted to retreat into a rarefied world of liturgy and the theological

treasures of the past. This defensive impulse, taken too far, can quench the missionary impulse which, rather than hunkering behind the barriers of a defensive confessionalism, knows that the best defense of the faith is a good offense.

Firm and high barriers alone will not defend our people's faith in a post-denominational world where people frequently change denominations in a lifetime and where family and kinship ties cross denominational lines. What is needed is an aggressive confessionalism rather than a defensive one, one that is willing to take the faith and doctrine into the public square of ideas where secular ideologies, new religions, and multiple Christian perspectives compete. Sectarian opposition to the world must be combined with missionary engagement with the world, carefully avoiding the extremes of legalistic narrowness or undiscerning worldliness.

At times Lutheran understandings of the distinction between the right-hand kingdom and the left-hand kingdom have provided an excuse to retreat from the world or capitulate to the secularizers by allowing them free rein in the public or academic sphere. Niebuhr suggested that this Lutheran "dualism" could be "the refuge of worldly minded persons who wish to make a slight obeisance in the direction of Christ" (Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 184). A balanced Lutheran understanding requires that we engage the mind and life of the world. We must sally forth beyond sectarian barriers to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Engaging the world does not mean compromising with the world's agenda. It does mean clearly confessing biblical truth in ways that cross lines of misunderstanding into other social worlds with their diverse cultures and world views. It means avoiding a ghettoized monocultural understanding of faithfulness to the Lutheran confessions. It cannot mean retreating into an idyllic world of "pure Lutheranism" that does not recognize the contingency and provisional nature of all our human arrangements and traditions. While a proper degree of sectarian opposition to the world is necessary and healthy in the midst of a secular society, a defensive confessionalism that fails to engage our pluralistic society and communicate across the walls of tradition by multiple means and modes is a sectarian retreat that is unsustainable in our world. A winsome and flexible engagement with the world is the best way to win battles for God's truth and souls for His Kingdom.

Dr. Eric J. Moeller
Assistant Professor
Pastoral Ministry and Missions
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne