

July 4, Freedom of Religion, and Christian Responsibility. July 7 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I hope all of you had a great July 4th! I certainly did. It's a day I celebrate with particular intention because my revolution against the British crown was a little more recent than the one July 4th celebrates.

Like about 50% of the Episcopal Church I'm a convert – from the Church of England! Now this might sound a little odd, since both the Church of England and the Episcopal Church are Anglican provinces of the Anglican Communion, but I don't see any contradiction! I left the Church of England and joined the Episcopal Church – was ordained a deacon in the C of E but waited to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church.

One of the reasons I left the Church of England (there were others) and came to the Episcopal Church had to do with the frequency of the requests for me to preside at the rites of the church for people who often weren't even Christians – at least, not “practicing” Christians, anyway. In my first year as an ordained person I presided at 4 weddings, 10 baptisms, and about 50 funerals. Not one of those rites was for someone who was a parishioner.

That's the way it is when you're a State Church. The State dictates that unless a person proclaims allegiance to a particular denomination, they're Anglican, which is why the C. Of E. claims 52 Million members, but has an average Sunday attendance of under 2 million.

Any legislation passed by the C. Of E's equivalent to our national legislative body, General Convention – called “General Synod” – requires the consent of the British Parliament. And Parliament, if it wants, can force the Church of England to take action even if it doesn't want to, because it's a State Church. Of course, if you happen to approve of Parliament's agenda that might seem okay, but what if Parliament's agenda is antithetical to the gospel?

This is not a new problem. Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire – with the willing and enthusiastic acquiescence of that block of Christians that becomes the Church as we know it – allowed the state to influence and dictate to the Church AND it allowed the Church to make claims on the direction of the State – heady, powerful stuff for the 4th Century Church.

The Reformation created a problem with this convenient institutional arrangement – multiple religious truths. The solution shows up in “The Peace of Westphalia of 1648”, which said, in Latin, this: “*curius regio, eius religio*” – the religion of a state is to be dictated by the religion of the prince. National Churches came into being. They got the idea, of course, from Henry VIII and the founding of the Church of England. If you didn't like the state religion, the Peace of Westphalia gave you three months to get out of the country! There was no recognition of religious conscience, and – despite the obvious religious pluralism created by the Reformation – no religious pluralism within a nation-state's borders.

And the pattern of State influencing Church and Church influencing – or trying to influence – State continued. The State Church had enormous power to censor any form of dissent – it simply

told the State to “take care of it”. In the post-Reformation period “taking care of it” meant burning people at the stake.

This is mostly why the Puritans left England and came to North America.

And it’s exactly why the Constitution, in article 4, and the First Amendment, seek to guarantee freedom of religion AND (and this is very important) freedom from religion. We are free to practice the religion of our choice, **but we are not free to impose that religion on others against their will.**

So July 4th means for us, as Christians, a great deal more than freedom from oppressive foreign kings! We also celebrate because we can practice our faith free from any state interference AND free from the interference of other faith bodies. There is no State Church here! Alleluia!

Okay, before you all get too carried away, we also need to remember that old adage, often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, that says this: “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” There is a real and constant danger in this nation of a re-forging of the alliance between the State and a particular brand of institutional Christian religion – often called “Fundamentalist” – that seeks to impose, or reimpose particular moral perspectives on the rest of us. It is, again, a marriage of convenience, just as it was for Constantine and the “orthodox” Christian party in 325 A.D.

Such a possibility demands of us as people of faith that we are both thoughtful and proactive when it comes to the intrusion of the state into religious matters, or of the attempt of some Christians to tell other Christians – us – what we should or should not believe or do.

We should not – must not – be blind adherents to any political philosophy or party, progressive or conservative, Republican or Democrat or Libertarian or Socialist or whatever **before we first acknowledge and live out of our identity as Christians.** Seeing one’s primary identity in political terms is antithetical to true religious faith. It is also the first step onto the slippery slope that would allow one faith to dominate, control, subordinate, or even destroy other faiths, or would invite the cooption of our faith by transient, self-interested, and self-serving political perspectives that will never fully or even partially respect the values that Jesus espoused and Paul developed, of living lives and sharing a common life based on active compassion and other-centered selflessness, nor of respecting the dignity of every human being.

Being thoughtful and proactive also means looking inward; we need to know what informs us as Christians. That means being open to the ways that faith always changes, and especially in the ways that contemporary biblical scholarship has opened up access to the bible in ways that would have been impossible even 50 years ago. And it means asking ourselves if we are seeking to impose our religious views on others against their wills.

Being thoughtful and proactive means just that – the last word there contains another word: “active”. We are called to live and act thoughtfully, not blindly, in ways that reflect the realities of 21st Century north America.

July 4th is a reminder of that, too. One reality is the form of government we live under. It's simply true that we have this particular democratic form because the first citizens of this nation deeply distrusted the unmerited concentration of power AND wealth in the hands of a few individuals whose commitment to the common good was often arbitrary and self-serving. The great documents of this nation – which are all celebrated on July 4th – demand our constant vigilance as citizens in the face of the ever-present threat of a return to such unmerited concentrations of power and wealth.

And the great document of our faith – the bible – demands a similar vigilance not simply to defend against that threat but also against the seductive aromas of complacency, co-option, and inaction that constantly seek to divert genuine people of faith away from our core commitment to the ways of God, which have to do with love, compassion, and justice.

So celebrate the birth of this nation, now some 237 years old, BUT do so with the work clothes of God laid out and ready, the tools of the spirit – compassion, love, justice – cleaned and polished, and with one ear cocked, listening for the sacred trumpet that is always calling us to act on behalf of God and God's reign. Amen.