



7-23-2015

The Government Needs Prayers

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Repository Citation

Forte, David, "The Government Needs Prayers" (2015). *Law Faculty Articles and Essays*. 813.
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By David F. Forte - - The Washington Times, Thursday, July 23, 2015

At 10:00 a.m. on every day when the Supreme Court is in session, the Justices proceed to their chairs while the Court's Marshal proclaims:

The Honorable, the Chief Justice and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! All persons having business before the Honorable, the Supreme Court of the United States, are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting. God save the United States and this Honorable Court!

It is a real prayer, coming from the first book of Samuel, asking for God's protection.

Public prayer is a necessary element in a republic dedicated to preserving the liberties of the people. And, in a larger sense, respect for religion is necessary for a republic to exist at all.

A republic, that is, a true republic, respects religious speech because such speech represents a different authority from governing power and hence affirms the limited nature of the governing power. It avows, by explicit reference, that the government is not the only game in town.

The iconic phrases that swirl about us in the motto, oath, and Presidential statement have the salutary lesson of warning the state of the danger of political hubris—that is, the conceit that it is only through government and the political process that social and moral problems can be addressed. They signal that, for the sake of liberty, there are limits to what government can do.

Recall Jefferson's plaint about slavery in his Notes on the State of Virginia. "Can the liberties of a Nation be secure," he asked, "when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that his justice cannot sleep forever." Or think of the Declaration's famous justification for the existence of government itself: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And recall Madison's conclusion: "Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe."

The very nature of a republican limited government, therefore, is grounded in the acknowledgement of the presence of another, higher sovereign, to whom individuals owe their loyalty and into which loyalty the government has not a right to intrude.

The week after the passage of the Bill of Rights, Congress asked George Washington to issue a proclamation of prayer and thanksgiving, and it hired a chaplain to begin each day's deliberation with a prayer to this very same God. Congress provided for chaplains for the armed forces. And they soon would begin the tradition, continued for a century or more, of hiring missionaries to convert the Indians so that they could adopt more civilized and republican ways. When Lincoln rededicated the torn republic back to work of the founders, he too did so with the prayer, "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

Today, when government officials take an oath, they call upon God to help them fulfill it with the words “So help me God.” We have added to the Pledge of Allegiance the declaration that we are “one Nation under God.” We have adopted as the national motto, “In God we trust.” None of these are instances of empty “ceremonial deism.” On the contrary, they are explicit affirmations of the necessity of a divine authority that is the ultimate source of rights, of guidance for public policy, and of judgment.

By acknowledging the different moral authority of religion from the state, a limited republican government unleashes the greatest engine for social betterment of the people. Virtually every major political social reform in our nation’s history has been motivated by religious belief: common education, abolition, worker’s rights, protection of women, temperance, desegregation. Religion has transformed and refined our society as no other source has. Think of the hundreds of hospitals, the thousands of institutions of education, the social services of feeding the hungry, ministering to prisoners, caring for the millions subject to addiction and alcoholism, protecting immigrants, the unborn, the marginalized, the widow, and the orphan.

Without an affirmation of God, without religious speech being welcomed in public discourse, and without a space for religion to be itself, the very notion of a republic will disintegrate before our eyes.

This essay was adapted from “Religion and the Republic,” published by Public Discourse.

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