

ROOT & BRANCH

Introducing "Root & Branch"

The Religion and Society Debate

1 — January 22, 2007

At the start of this our 30th anniversary year, we are introducing a new commentary that will appear at least quarterly and usually more often. Its focus will be on the vitality of religions in today's world and on arguments about their influence in society.

In most cases today when the media turn their attention to religion, they treat it as one among many factors or variables of human life, distinguishing religion from sports or politics or science, for example. Yet, if we look carefully at religious communities and even whole societies around the world, we can see that religions typically function not as one variable among others but as the *root* from which life's *branches* grow and on which they continue to depend.

Our intention with this new commentary is to point out, explain, challenge, and offer our point of view on the religious dynamics that are shaping the world today. We'll discuss legal cases, political battles, books, articles, and public speeches. And from time to time, we'll respond to questions that come our way.

For starters, consider the following remark by Terry Eastland, reviewing a new book (in *The Weekly Standard*, 11/06/06) by Daryl Hart titled *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State*. Eastland writes, "As Hart points out, Christ famously told his disciples to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, distinguishing between the two jurisdictions of church and state."

Now, it matters not whether both Eastland and Hart, or only one of them, believe that Christ's statement distinguishes two jurisdictions of church and state; that interpretation of Jesus' words is wildly off base. What Jesus said was that the authority of Caesar, evident on the coin Jesus was shown, indicates that those living under Caesar should recognize his authority. This is vintage biblical teaching. However, the next thing Jesus said was not that God's jurisdiction is over the church. No, Jesus said simply and clearly, "render to God what is God's." So we must ask, what belongs to God? Anyone listening to Jesus knew the answer: render *everything* to God, including the allegiance one owes to Caesar, because God's jurisdiction is all-embracing. Caesar does not control a jurisdiction separate from God's jurisdiction, because no such jurisdiction exists.

God is sovereign over everyone and everything, including government, the market, science, and the entire globe. Do you want to know what to do with your tax dollars, or your property, or anything else that is part of your life? Then consider carefully what

you owe in each area of responsibility and make sure you give honor to whom honor is due, taxes to whom taxes are owed, and hard work to whom hard work is owed. And in all that you do, give to God what belongs to God, namely, everything that you are and do—everything that occupies you in every sphere of the whole of life.

Jump with me next to an op-ed piece by John Kay in the *Financial Times* of London (1/9/07). "Environmentalism," he writes, "offers an alternative account of the natural world to the religious and an alternative anti-capitalist account of the political world to the Marxist. The rise of environmentalism parallels in time and place the decline of religion and of socialism." Environmentalism has become a kind of religion.

Business people, says Kay, should respond to the rise of environmentalism as they would to "other forms of religious belief. Business leaders do not themselves have to believe its doctrines. Indeed we should be wary if they do: business linked to faiths and ideologies is a sinister and unaccountable power."

Kay, I believe, is correct that for many people modern ideologies have displaced Christian and other religious ways of life. Environmentalism, or socialism, or some other -ism comes to function as the central motivation and vision for life. But insofar as this is true, those who adhere to such -isms have turned part of God's creation into the root meaning of life, making it into an idol.

What does Kay think of this? For him, apparently, all religions and ideologies are dangerous. He wants business people to avoid the danger and stick to sound judgments about life in this world. That means not mixing business with religions of any kind. Yet Kay does not take into account the fact that many people have turned business, or the market, or profit, or capitalism into their idol, their religion, their central motivation and vision for life. Idols can be found everywhere.

The true challenge of the Christian way of life is to come to a balanced appreciation of all of God's creation and to learn to develop every dimension of it properly. Yet we can do this only by worshipping and serving the true God—the Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of all things. Nothing but God can be God. All idolatry, every -ism, is forbidden. Render to God what is God's.

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