

Democracy or Religion?

Posted On:December 31, 1969

During our nation's founding, western Europe, including England, had recently emerged from two centuries of ugly religious wars. The educated elites considered themselves men of reason, not religion, and they were in charge after religious wars ended. The French Revolution went resolutely secular, going so far as to persecute Catholic priests. Eventually, the two factions made peace, and France was never again an overtly Catholic state.

The new United States underwent the same alienation from fundamentalist religion. They did not outlaw religion, but they designed firm separation between religion and state, with provisions that barred government from ever supporting any single religious faction. All faiths were permitted freedom, but none permitted rule.

Our founders, all of them well educated, were different from the majority of their new citizens, so within a few years, there were religious revivals that could have threatened democracy. Fortunately, they all petered out before they could do serious harm.

Religion is once more threatening democracy today. Our minority party, the Trump cult, has found that if they can attach themselves to religious fundamentalism, they can attract the least educated sector of the public: less educated, but more inclined to violence. One vote-getting issue they promoted was the antipathy of the less educated to the new feminist movement, as well as the newly assertive Black equality movement.

Republican laws in the less populated and less educated states were thwarted by the courts, over and over again. Gerrymandering succeeded in giving power to the otherwise minority Republicans, and many state governments were dominated by this gambit. A long-game Senatorial Republican campaign packed federal courts with their nominees, and then unfairly stacked the Supreme Court, our once honorable institution, into an increasingly religious body.

The recent announcements of the court's reversal of Roe v Wade, cancelling state laws about funding religious schools, and the century-old right of cities to regulate guns are decisions endangering women, secularity, security, and the court itself.

This religious faction on the court is attempting to give greater authority to religious doctrine, particularly fundamentalist Christianity, and to a flawed concept called "originalism," in which they base all opposition to the modern expansions of rights to how the original authors of the Constitution might have felt.

Since "abortion" is not a founding right of women, it should no longer be national law, returning women's fate to the states to sort out. We see now how some of these states sort it out, and it is creating panic among the vast majority of Americans, who do not support this.

Contrary to the Originalists, the founders did make room for changes to the Constitution as our society evolved and new ideas created new reality. If this were not so, the Emancipation of Slavery would not be national law and would be left to the states to decide. We have seen how that notion ended in a civil war.

The originalists never anticipated women as equal citizens either, and the law giving the mandate to women to vote and in successive movements, to be equal to male citizens in all things, made us a more perfect union.

The current opinions of Justice Alito and the other two Trump appointees are based on their form of Christianity. Judaism has never considered the unborn fetus as anything but part of the mother's body until birth. Catholic doctrine was once so draconian that in a choice between saving the mother or the baby in a dangerous birth, the baby mattered more. In Jewish law, this is unthinkable. No one religion should rule.

All three major religions have different standards about the "personhood" of a fetus. For some Christians, it is the moment of conception; for Muslims, when the first heartbeat is felt; for Jews, the first breath of a living baby. The majority of good religious people support a secular state.

If democracy depends on voting majorities, the religious zealots are losing. Their enthusiastic followers among the less educated and older citizens are dying off.

However, the danger is now, we must now save our democracy and restore it to rule of reason, not religion.

683 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@gmail.com or www.globalthink.net.