

“Sacrificing chickens or virgins isn’t kosher.”

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“National Prayer”

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We are a Christian country, saith the well-meaning pastor in a letter to the editor. We might, however, wonder what kind of Christian he means. Like monkeys, we’re creatures of varied species. To be accurate, the United States isn’t a Christian country. To be doubly accurate, ours is a country raised up from Reformed Protestant principles, which themselves arose from Hebrew precepts.

There’s a marked difference between being a Christian nation and being historically inspired by the Reformed Protestant ethos. I’m surprised this pastor would want us to be grouped with Afghanistan, Iran, among other theocracies. “Of all the ‘ocracies,” James Fenimore Cooper teased, “hypocrisy is the most flourishing.” It’s accurate to posit that the sentiments, logic, theology, and principles of Reformed Protestantism supplied the rootstock of what fruited forth as these United States. Never forget that an essential tenet of Reformed Protestantism recoils at an established state religion. Why? We worry whenever religion and state merge, a gangrenous symptom of despotism.

Why? Because the established church in several colonies, the Church of England, imprisoned Baptist and Presbyterians, among others, for preaching the gospel. Francis Makemie, Presbyterian, was arrested, jailed, and charged with preaching without license. The Virginia Charter required Roman Catholics to take an “Oath of Supremacy” accepting that the ecclesiastical laws of England governed Virginia. Laws were passed against Baptists and Quakers. Baptists were imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes to support the local Congregational Church. Baptists were accused of child abuse for refusing to have their children baptized. The First Amendment wasn’t written to hinder religion from engaging in matters of state. It was written to hinder the state from messing around with us. Religions serve nations best as tough prophetic witnesses. Does the Russian Orthodox Church worship Christ or Putin? Do we?

Because we humans tend to let personal (oft pecuniary or ideological) interests eclipse principle, and because we humans admire virtue so long as virtue serves our vain desires, we admit that absolute freedom must be limited to protect civil society’s fundamental obligations and covenantal cohesion. Sacrificing chickens or virgins isn’t kosher. Mandatory conversion makes for lousy adherents. Polygamy (aka, legalized non-sequential marriage) creates violations of personal rights frowned upon by society’s social compact. Child brides too. If we wish to benefit from living here, we agree to practice mature deference for mutual success. I obey traffic lights despite them infringing on my liberty to drive how I want to drive. When I don’t my selfishness injures myself and, worse, you.

Human nature being human nature, we find that if we trust in the virtue of our leaders -- governmental, religious, business, media, academia -- we frequently will be proved sorely mistaken. Power devours. Virtue is wanted but cannot be depended upon. Pure motives get conveniently adjusted to justify dishonest tactics for ignoble ends, where spleen rules mind and heart, sadly most flagrantly evident today by mad anti-constitutional vandals dominating those formerly called Republicans. This isn’t okay. Justice measures us. Truth matters. Injustice and dishonesty sow distrust. Distrust breeds selfishness. Selfishness incubates fear. Fear spawns hate. Hate destroys everyone. Reformed Protestantism believes a rogue lurks inside every saint, there’s a cannibal inside each of us, gluttonous enough to

devour our neighbor. We trust less in persons being virtuous and prefer to trust that they will act responsibly, provided there are sufficient goads, rewards, and restraints to insure that they will be held responsible. Cooper explained: "Responsibility is the substitute for virtue in a politician as discipline is the substitute for courage in a soldier." He added: "Divide the trust to divide the abuses." Wise, worthy, law-abiding leaders embrace this.

This commends prudence about endorsing the National Day of Prayer, playfully coincident next week with Cinco de Mayo. Piety on the Court House steps in the morning, margaritas by noon. Saints preserve us, look how disingenuous religious and political actors are cashing in on this ritual. Jesus is indeed fungible.

Patriotic Christians resent equating cross with flag. This National Day of Prayer can smack too opportunistic for conservative leanings. This Day of Prayer might have more meat if it included less haughtiness and more justice, plus love for the oppressed, ignorant, wanting, lowly, hungry, innocent, those denied their divine right to the pursuit of happiness besides other inalienable rights. Real conservatives affirm liberal democracy. Years ago I persuaded the Octorara School Board, where I served for several years, to stop beginning each meeting by reciting the Lord's Prayer. Why? Because I'm religious and conservative, not reactionary.