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Church and State: United States and Italy

Religion and politics: these are two words that, upon mentioning, conjure passionate opinions and beliefs for many people. Both religion and politics are very sensitive issues in societies because people do not always see eye-to-eye when it comes to said topics, and oftentimes differences in opinions can lead to schisms between people. There is much controversy in various societies pertaining to just how well-defined the split is between political institutions and religious institutions.

The church and the state are two separate institutions that have “legal separation in Catholic European countries, while some countries (Great Britain, for example) are consisted of an integration of the two” (Alford). Italy is a catholic country located in Europe therefore it beholds a “legal separation”. According to professor S. Semplici’s lecture on July 11th, 2008, “[i]n Italy is in unthinkable for religion to be incorporated into politics”. The United States also is said to be based upon the belief that church and state are two disconnected units; however, there is proof that this may not exactly be the case – some of the evidence is blatantly visible to just about anyone.

It is evident that religion plays a role in Italian society. There is an extensive sense of Catholicism throughout the nation; “[t]he sociology of religion developed in Italy essentially as the sociology of Catholicism” (Cipriani S44). Even non-religious people realize that when they come to Italy they will be faced with many churches, depictions of

holy figures and an overall Catholic sense of unity. Vatican City, where the Pope resides, is found without Rome, Italy's capital city, furthermore validating the belief that Italy is a fairly catholic nation. Italian families, though not as religious as they once were, still hold religion with high regards; many live their lives based upon the Catholic faith, and if they do not outright admit it they worry about making a "mala figura" (bad impression) on other people who gauge the lifestyles of others based on what is supposed to be "proper". It is clear that religion does affect social policies in Italy, but it does not necessarily affect politics in the way that it does in America.

Any student who has studied American History in high school should be familiar with some sort of phrase that relates to the separation of the church as an institution and the state as another. However there are plenty of references to religion through political and social aspects of society, three examples would be the use of the phrase "In God We Trust" on the one-dollar American bill, the use of the Bible when inaugurating the president of the United States and also the ever-popular American mantra of "God Bless America" (Semplici). This comes off as extremely contradictory in a country where there is supposed to be a clear split between the religious affairs and political affairs. Americans use money every day so there is not a day that passes where most Americans have religion presented to them via the government, even if it may be in such a "discreet" manner. One could also wonder if American citizens who are not of a Christian-based religion get offended when they see their president, the most powerful person in the country who is supposed to be in office on their behalf, being sworn in on a religious book that has no connections to their respective religions. Nationalism is a wonderful thing, and if people can come together and unify for their nation it is highly respectable, but is it necessary to tie religion, once again, into a political aspect of life?

One of the definitions for the word “God”, according to www.dictionary.com, is “the Supreme Being considered with reference to a particular attribute.” Nowhere in that definition is there an allusion to any particular religion, but in the United States it is presumed that when God is used in a general phrase (like on the currency, for instance) it is meant to refer to the God of Christianity and its sister religions. It seems as if even though it is not outright stated the United States is a Christian nation; this is peculiar for a country that prides itself on being a “melting pot” of so many different types of people. According to a survey conducted by the ARIS (American Religious Identity Service) back in 2001, 76.5% of the United States population identified as Christian. (www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html#religions). Clearly a majority of the nation is of a Christian persuasion; however, the interesting part is that the next largest religious group, according to that same survey, were those who identified as “Nonreligious/Secular” at 13.2%. It is rather ironic that the next most common “religious” group, following the Christians, were those who have no ties to any religion at all, yet they live in a country where they are indiscreetly exposed to God and predominantly Christian beliefs on a daily basis. America is supposed to be a country where people have the right to believe in whatever form of faith they choose; some people leave their own countries to come here for religious tolerance and freedom, yet they are still exposed to a standard religion that may not be of their persuasion.

Undoubtedly there are many issues that occur in any given society that can be viewed as controversial by its citizens. One issue that has caused and continues to cause controversy is that pertaining to gay marriage, particularly in America. Current President George W. Bush has openly stated on various occasions that he does not support gay marriage for a variety of reasons; according to Bush “[m]arriage cannot be severed from its

cultural, religious and natural roots without weakening the good influence of society." (cnn.com). It is without a doubt that the president of a country should look out for his citizens and do what is best for them, but the question that is up for debate regarding Bush's decision to "protect" his people is why religion factors into the equation. America, once again, is supposed to have a clear separation between the political and religious institutions, but Bush is bringing religion into his reasoning for denying gay and lesbian citizens the right to be recognized, on a political level, the right to be united. In Italy, "[n]either civil unions nor same-sex marriage are recognized under Italian law" (www.wikipedia.com); therefore Italy is no further ahead in a liberal sense than America is when the subject at hand is gay marriage. However, what is most striking about this development is that Italy is a predominantly Catholic country, and many Catholics validate their stance on opposing same-sex marriage by mentioning their religion; America, on the other hand, prides itself on being accepting and diverse, but to defer having to address the issue of same-sex marriage on a national level the government leaves it to the individual states to decide. This seems contradictory and rather illogical.

Religion and politics are two individual entities that, when mixed, can cause quite the controversy, especially in areas where there is supposed to be a clearly defined separation. Inevitably some factors in life do sometimes cross paths and, at times, such scenarios are out of a person's control – when people choose to violate the boundaries, however, is when situations become unjust and people start to feel violated. In my opinion there are differences between how religion and politics are put into action in both Italy and the United States.

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