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The American Taliban

If you believe in the separation of church and state, then you probably think that evangelicals exert far too much influence on American life, our politics and culture. When I remarked to a friend that evangelicals are the America's answer to the Taliban, he thought the comparison was too harsh. After all, he said, "Evangelicals don't go around killing people."

Maybe not, but the beliefs they hold and the positions they take can have deadly consequences. Take the evangelical position on abortion, which has had a major effect on national foreign policy. The Helms Amendment, first enacted in 1973, provides that no US funds "may be used to pay for the performance of abortions as a method of family planning or to motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions." What a strange dichotomy. Abortion is legal in the US and available to all our citizens, yet we will not allow its practice in developing countries. And what is the consequence? According to Sneha Barot of the Guttmacher Institute, every year, millions of women suffer serious injuries from unsafe abortion, and 47,000 of them die—almost all in the Global South.

I don't know anyone who likes the idea of abortion, but most objections to it seem based on a religious belief that the soul enters the body at conception, something for which there is simply no proof. And because there is no evidence, it should have no bearing on our laws or national policy. People everywhere must be free to make their own decisions on abortion, decisions based on personal beliefs. If one's religious convictions tell her or him that abortion is wrong, then it is clearly wrong for that person, but it does not follow that it is wrong for anyone else.

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Evangelicals have a right to think abortion is wrong and to try to persuade others. But if we live in a society that is truly free, that belief cannot be imposed on others, including non-believers. Doing so necessarily infringes on others' rights. We have lived in a culture that encourages honest debate. Perhaps through debate, the pro-life faction can convince the pro-choice side that they are right, and abortion clinics will cease to exist for lack of interest, or perhaps not, but our laws need to be silent, structured to neither require nor prevent abortion. Yet today evangelicals rejoice at placing Brett Kavanaugh on our Supreme Court, trusting that Roe v Wade will at long last be overturned, while others fear that personal freedom will become constrained by a religious belief.

Evangelicals claim that the constitution was inspired by Christ, and is based on Judeo-Christian principles. But not all of the founding fathers were Christian. Many, like Jefferson, were deists, and some, like Franklin appear to have been atheists. But all of the founding fathers realized and understood the dangers posed by both monarchy and theocracy and wisely chose to separate religious belief from our government and to base our laws on reason, not scripture. The words Christ and Christian do not appear in our founding documents.

Nonetheless, theocratic government is an area where evangelicals and the Taliban have something in common. For the Taliban government and religion are one and the same. While here in the US they are separated, there are many in our government who would set aside the Constitution in favor of biblical teaching. Most recently attorney general Jeff Sessions quoted from the bible to justify separating children from their parents, and Judge Roy Moore was sanctioned twice by our court system for basing judgments on the ten commandments and displaying the commandments in his court house. No, we are not a theocracy, but can anyone doubt that if the Judge Roy Moores had their way we would become a Christian theocracy?

Roy Moore is not an aberration. Our equally extreme evangelical vice president Mike Pence also believes our laws should be based on the bible. And he opposes abortion, Planned Parenthood, gay rights and stem cell research. Moreover, he denies climate change, and promotes the false equivalence of creationism and evolution. Religious belief blinds him to the mountains of evidence that have shown us how truly fascinating and marvelous our real world is. A closed mind one step away from the presidency is truly alarming.

Evangelicals believe the bible, as the Taliban believe the Koran, to be the true word of their one god. And evangelicals point to the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies and

miracles as proof, a circular logic that does could not meet any scientific standard. And while there is no scientific proof of ancient miracles, the ancient writers would consider many things that are commonplace today as miraculous—cancer cures by radiation or chemo treatment for example. Far more “miracles” have been produced by modern science and medicine than were ever conceived in the bible or produced by prayer. What is certain is that the rejection of science in favor of ancient scripture already inhibits research and the development of new drugs and medical procedures, which have dire consequences, as it has in the Islamic states.

The philosopher Spinoza, one of the most brilliant minds of the seventeenth century, was raised in the Jewish faith. He recognized inconsistencies in the bible, and became a critic of Judaism, and in fact all organized religions, for which he was labeled a heretic. Nonetheless, he believed in a god and that the one true, consistent and important message of the bible was “love thy neighbor.”

Spinoza also understood the danger posed by theocracy and explained that theocratic governments fail because their leaders are motivated by personal interpretations of scripture, rather than doing what is in the public interest. Such subjectivity inevitably leads to disagreement. The thousand-year violent and bloody struggle between the Sunnis and Shiites is the most glaring example, but there are many examples of similar conflict between Christian sects, the Church of England and the Catholic Church during the reign of Henry the Eighth for instance.

Spinoza also believed that a democratic society, with laws based on reason and evidence, like the society we enjoy in the United States, offers the greatest potential to serve the public good. But we live in a time when our American democracy is threatened. Evangelical support of national leaders who choose to ignore evidence, refuse to reason and attack our democratic institutions should alarm every American. Blind adherence to the bible promises to be as damaging to our way of life as the Taliban’s blind adherence to the Koran has devastated Afghanistan’s once thriving culture. The vision of Spinoza and our inspired American way of life are at stake.