



## Williams v. Winthrop

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*  
– Matthew 22:15-22

A more intimidating setting is difficult to imagine: eighteen powerful politicians in high-backed leather chairs, each accompanied by an entourage of partisan aides, peering down from the dais at the witness table, microphones poised to capture every word. Bright lights from unforgiving television cameras blind those providing testimony. Pushy reporters press for position, ready to pounce on controversy.

President of Chicago Theological Seminary, professor of theology, translator of original Greek texts into the English versions of the Bible, author/editor of ten books on contemporary religious life – Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite presents a formidable figure. An articulate spokesperson, she is not one to wilt under pressure.

Called before the Senate Judiciary Committee in the matter of the confirmation of John Roberts as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, she provides the panel with sixteen pages of researched reason – thoughtful insights into the promised protection from tyranny written into the *Constitution*, the theological thinking of its framers, the continuing value of its prohibition against the establishment of any one religion by the state, the deeply held convictions of the

prophetic and progressive faith traditions, and the critical importance in our modern pluralistic society for the Supreme Court to guard freedom of religion for every one of every faith through strict adherence to the First Amendment's guarantees.

But staunchly conservative Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama doesn't like what he hears. Neither would the religious right, a constituency whose interests he champions in the halls of Congress. Having received in the previous election a 100% rating from the Family Research Council, a 100% rating from the Eagle Forum, and a 100% rating from the Christian Coalition, he decides not to engage Thistlethwaite in respectful dialogue, but rather to try to entrap her in a series of hot button issues.

"Ms. Thistlethwaite," Sessions begins. (Not "Dr." or "Professor" or "President" Thistlethwaite – no title to acknowledge her education or experience or expertise.) "Ms. Thistlethwaite, just yesterday a district court ruled that the Pledge of Allegiance, which has 'under God' in it, is unconstitutional. Do you have an opinion about that?"

Thistlethwaite turns the question around: "Well, I'm very interested, Senator Sessions, to know whether you think people will be increased in their faith if they just say those words repetitively. I don't know what the goal is if it is not to establish a deistic religion. As I'm citing from the founders, God doesn't need your help."

"Well, what about..." Since the first question didn't work, Sessions tries another. "I guess you would further say that we should take 'In God We Trust' off the coins?"

Susan told me she decided to go with Jesus on that one. "Do I think it's a good idea to confuse Caesar and God?" she asks the senator. "No, I don't. 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's,'" she answers.

Having failed twice to catch her up, he decides to throw her a real curve ball. "You would oppose then the chaplain of the United States Senate?" he asks.

The question comes out of left field. "Pardon me," the seminary president replies.

Perhaps sensing he finally has her cornered, the senator bears down on his prey. "Do you oppose the position of chaplain of the United States Senate?"

"Do I think you all need spiritual guidance?" Thistlethwaite counters.

The transcript records that the chamber breaks into laughter. Having more than met his match, the posturing senator doesn't dare ask her anything else. After a futile attempt at making face-saving remarks, he may even have uttered a secret prayer of thanks when the red light indicated his time had expired.

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When you encounter the word “Pharisee” in the scriptures, think “lawyer.” The Pharisees were not priests, not clergy, not ordained leaders. Rather, they were religiously conservative laypersons, the religious right wing of Jesus’ day, people intent upon every letter of God’s law being followed literally.

As such, the Pharisees considered Jesus a threat to their efforts to impose their understanding of God’s law upon the entire nation. Jesus permitting his disciples to break the Sabbath ordinances, Jesus befriending prostitutes and tax collectors and others engaged in what they considered obviously evil behaviors, Jesus apparently thinking nothing wrong with actually touching what God had declared unclean – all deeply offended their moral sensitivities.

Then there was his awful Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus had repeated, over and over again, “You have heard it said... You have heard it said... You have heard it said...” Heard it said by whom? By them, the Pharisees, of course! They were the ones standing up for righteousness. They were the ones declaring right and wrong in unequivocal terms. They were the ones demanding strict obedience to the word of God. Somebody surely needed to do it in this sorely sinful world.

“You have heard it said....but I say to you.” Who was this Jesus to say anything contrary to what they were teaching? By what authority did he come along with his itinerant preaching about love trumping the law?

Jesus calls the Pharisees “hypocrites.” It was not the only time. Jesus’ progressive ways threaten literalist faith. Fundamentalism cannot stand the truth Jesus taught which sets people free. So, in Matthew 22, we have three attempts by the Pharisees and their compatriots to entrap him.

“Teacher,” – we can almost hear the sarcasm in their voices – “we know you are sincere, and teach the ways of God in accordance with truth. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

Feel the hush falling over the crowd as the Pharisees confront him. It’s a trick question. Jesus loses no matter how he answers. “Yes” will discredit him with the masses who hate the Romans. “No” could lead to his arrest.

Jesus asks for a coin. They give him a denarius, the silver coin used to pay the tax. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” he asks them.

The coin is familiar. Strong nose. Upright chin. Laurel crown. They knew the face as much as we know it is George Washington on our quarters and Thomas Jefferson on our nickels.

Tiberius. The tax was going to Emperor Tiberius so that his Roman legions could patrol their streets. Some *Pax Romana!* What kind of peace requires hated foreign armies to occupy one's homeland?

"And whose title?" The Latin inscribed around the head translates to "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." See how easily god and government get entangled? Prince and pulpit? Church and state?

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," Jesus told the Pharisees, "and to God the things that are God's."

There would be no discrediting with the crowds that day. No arrest by the Roman guards. If anything, the encounter heightened Jesus' popularity with the masses. Outwitted, the Pharisees retreat to plot their next power play against him.

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Browsing the bookstore shelves, a certain title caught my eye. The book was by Noah Feldman, who teaches law at New York University. It's entitled *Divided by God: America's Church-State Problem*.

We are a nation divided, not between those who believe in God and those who don't, but between one group of believers who would impose through the enacting of various laws a particular and often narrow understanding of Christian faith and values upon everyone else, and another group of believers – actually several groups of believers from multiple faiths – who experience such laws as contrary to and an imposition upon their religious consciences.

This divide became evident a few years ago when the now former chief justice of the supreme court in Senator Sessions' home state of Alabama, late one night, had a 5000 pound chunk of granite, inscribed with the Ten Commandments, moved into his courthouse rotunda. Higher courts found the monument infringed upon the constitutional separation of church and state and ordered its removal. Judge Roy Moore refused, defying the very laws he had sworn to uphold. People of faith found themselves on both sides.

This divide is evident in national, state, and local elections when one side appeals to the religious right with its definition of "moral values" and accompanying legislative agenda, while the other side seeks the votes of those longing to be free to make choices for themselves regarding what is or is not moral in light their own faith understandings, their own relationship with their God.

And this divide remains evident in the hot button issues of the day – not just whether "under God" should be left in the Pledge of Allegiance, but also in the debate over abortion, affirmative action, charitable choice, the death penalty, the environment, euthanasia, the funding of religious schools, prayer in schools, same-

sex marriage, stem-cell research, the teaching of so-called “intelligent design,” the war in Iraq, and on and on and on.

This divide is not new. Certainly it is not anything new to the Congregationalist tradition which gave birth to Bangor Theological Seminary. It goes back at least to the church fight between John Winthrop and Roger Williams.

Winthrop was the first governor of Massachusetts. In the spring of 1630 he had led a fleet of 11 vessels and 700 Puritan passengers into the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whereupon he delivered his famous “city set upon a hill” sermon, declaring that they were called by God to establish a holy commonwealth ruled by divine law as they understood it to be set forth in the Bible.

A year later, in 1631, Roger Williams also sailed into Massachusetts, taking his first job as an assistant minister at First Church in Boston. Hardly off the ship, he took on the Governor of Massachusetts’ attempt to turn the colony into a Puritan theocracy, refusing to back down even at his trial. Declared Williams:

I do affirm it to be against the testimony of Christ Jesus for the civil state to impose upon the people a religion, a worship, a ministry. The state should give free and absolute permission of conscience to all...  
Your breath blows out the candle of liberty in this land.

In the matter of Williams v. Winthrop, Williams was banished from Massachusetts. He left to found and to become the first governor of Rhode Island – a colony where citizens would enjoy “a haven for the cause of conscience,” because he built there “a wall of separation” between church and state.

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Psalm 99 opens with “The Lord is sovereign; let the peoples tremble!” Sometimes I find myself trembling when I allow myself to think about the present unhealthy entanglement of religion and politics. I tremble when I think of some of the things religious people are doing in and to this country in the name of God.

It is not that I believe religion should stop being a voice for justice and mercy in the public square. Nor is it that I believe religious values should not be voiced in political debate. But I do worry that we are living in a day in which, contrary to the establishment clause of the United States *Constitution*, one understanding within one faith tradition is being imposed through various laws upon all people of all religious traditions.

Asked to address the topic of being a faithful church in the face of the empire, what I heard Thistlethwaite say to several of us on retreat that the present desire of the religious right to have its set of moral values imposed upon us all, coupled with the willingness of political leaders to enact legislation to accomplish that end, poses a far greater danger to our liberty than any terrorist threat from beyond our borders. I agree.

“Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar, and unto God the things that are God’s,” said Jesus. Note how he left it up to each one of us to determine which is which. We must be free to make such choices. We must be free to follow our conscience.

Religious freedom is far too precious a right guaranteed by the *Constitution* for us either to give it up or to have it taken away by a religious fundamentalism that would impose its way on everyone.

Amen.