

The Pope in America

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The address by Pope Francis to a joint session of the United States Congress today represents a milestone in the rightward march of the American political establishment, which is jettisoning what little remains of its democratic heritage in favor of the open embrace of reaction.

As he parades with his entourage through Washington, at the center of a massive security operation, the pope, decked out in his medieval vestments, looks out on an America whose democracy is in shambles.

No pope has ever been invited to address the American legislature, from the first meeting of the Continental Congress in 1774 to the current 114th US Congress, which convened in 2015. The pope's unprecedented address is a direct affront to the secular foundations of the American republic as well as to the US Constitution.

The first clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, part of the Bill of Rights, incorporates the principle of the separation of church and state and prohibits Congress from establishing any religion. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the First Amendment was intended to erect a "wall of separation" between church and state, a measure considered essential for free thought and individual liberty.

This fundamental democratic conception is nowhere to be found in the wall-to-wall media coverage of the papal visit or the comments of politicians. The empty-headed fawning and gushing over "His Holiness" is a slap in the face to atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims and all others who have a democratic right to live in a society where the state does not take any position on religion in general or any particular creed.

President Obama set the tone with his official greetings at the White House, addressing the pope as "Holy Father" and "Your Holiness," and beginning by saying, "What a beautiful day the Lord has made." The

words "God" (5), "Lord" (2), "Jesus" (1), "holy" (6) and "holiness" (2) together appeared a total of 16 times in Obama's 10-minute welcome. For his part, the pope spoke about family values, religious liberty and the environment, making one reference to the "Creator" and concluding with, "God Bless America."

"You remind us that people are only truly free when they can practice their faith freely," Obama declared. This was said with a straight face to the leader of the institution responsible for the Holy Inquisition, i.e., centuries of repression, torture and murder of Europe's "heretical" scientists, philosophers and artists. This is the same Catholic Church that maintained close ties with the fascist regimes in Spain, Italy, Poland, Croatia and Slovakia, and signed the Reichskonkordat with Nazi Germany in 1933.

Beneath his white robes, the man Obama was praising, the former archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio, is personally implicated in Argentina's "Dirty War" (1976-1983). In the name of the struggle against Marxism, the Church under Bergoglio's leadership supported the military junta while it caused an estimated 30,000 workers, students and intellectuals to "disappear," and while tens of thousands more were abducted and tortured. So much for Obama's champion of freedom!

The mutual love-fest between Obama and Francis calls to mind the words of Jefferson: "In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own."

But the American media is not concerned with such things. Instead, the various news outlets are shamelessly competing to outdo each other in kowtowing before the visiting pontiff. A deluge of articles and television programs have appeared on such subjects as the minutiae of the papal wardrobe, the papal entourage, the papal itinerary and the papal

automobile.

Nothing resembling democratic or historical consciousness is anywhere to be found in the vast effusion of media coverage of the papal visit. One would not know from watching this media spectacle, for example, that the United States had no diplomatic relations with the Holy See from 1867 until 1984, when relations were first established under President Ronald Reagan.

Nor would the viewer have any inkling that the election of John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president, was deeply controversial. As a presidential candidate in 1960, Kennedy was attacked on the grounds that his Catholic faith meant that as president he would be taking orders from Rome.

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” Kennedy declared in a major speech responding to his critics, “where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”

Kennedy prided himself on his record of “declared stands against an ambassador to the Vatican,” and added, “I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me.”

The contrast between Kennedy and Obama could not be more stark. However, this is not a question of individuals, but a reflection of the protracted decay of American democracy over the past half-century. The Kennedy administration by no means represented a golden age, but it provides a reference point for measuring the impact of decades of political reaction and the increasing subordination of all of the country’s institutions to a criminal and ever-wealthier financial aristocracy.

The first decade-and-a-half of the 21st century has witnessed a direct assault on basic democratic rights and institutions across the board, accompanied by an accelerating growth of social inequality and military aggression abroad. America is a country where the government spies on all of the activities of its citizens, where torturers and killer cops enjoy complete

impunity and where the president invokes the right to order the assassination of any person anywhere in the world. The electoral process has been stripped of any genuinely democratic content, reduced to a degrading contest between various frontmen for billionaire oligarchs divided between two parties completely controlled by the corporate-financial elite, the military and the CIA.

The deliberate promotion of religious obscurantism serves definite political ends. The papal visit occurs in the midst of a relentless campaign to revive medieval and reactionary notions—anti-rational, anti-scientific, anti-democratic—in order to mobilize social forces that can be used to block and suppress popular opposition.

Last year, for example, the US Supreme Court decided that Hobby Lobby, a “Christian corporation,” had the “right” to impose religious views on its employees. Last month, a reactionary campaign was organized around Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis, who refused to issue marriage licenses to gay couples on the grounds of “God’s authority.” And several Republican presidential candidates are openly appealing to anti-Muslim bigotry.

The socialist position on the separation of church and state was clearly stated by Lenin in 1905. “Complete separation of church and state is what the socialist proletariat demands of the modern state and the modern church,” Lenin wrote.

“Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule.”

The total prostration of the American political establishment and media before the pope underscores the basic fact that in our era, the defense of democratic rights, including the principle of separation of church and state, is completely bound up with the development of a mass socialist movement of the working class.



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