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Roadside Shrines, George W. Bush, and The Transformation of Church-State Relations

By Robert Rabinowitz

President George W. Bush's recent statements and activities have seemed to many to transgress the boundaries between church and state so sacred to most American Jews. Given the United States' historical role as a sanctuary from religious persecution, it is no surprise that many people have an allergic reaction to the establishment of an office in the White House to promote the state funding of religious groups to carry out social and welfare work and the prominent invocation of Jesus Christ at a Presidential inauguration. But we should be clear. The church/state divide is based on the rather Protestant premise that religion is a private matter and that, therefore, all public institutions should be secular. The current alarm about the blurring of the church/state divide ignores the possibility that religion will actually be transformed by such a shift so that an increased public role for religion need not be oppressive.

One example of a trend that exemplifies this possibility appeared last year in a small article in the excellent Library of Congress magazine, *Civilization* (<http://www.civmag.com>), that documented the spread across the United States of memorials for people killed in traffic accidents or at other sites associated with violent or unexpected death. These shrines first appeared in the Southwest and other regions with significant Mexican-American and Latin American populations. Anybody who has traveled through Latin America will be familiar with such memorials thanks to the frequently poor driving conditions and the worse driving habits. These small shrines frequently consist of little more than a wooden cross with a photograph and some candles and flowers, but they can be more elaborate and often become relatively permanent features of the landscape. The *Civilization* article argued that "We may be seeing nothing less than a major shift in America's deeply ingrained and fundamentally Protestant approach to death. The United States and northern Europe have long emphasized privacy, individual loss, and solemnity in grieving, but sidewalk altars and parking lot shrines invite participation by all, allow displays of emotion, and

implicitly recognize a continuing relationship with the dead" (Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000, p.30).

This article caught my eye for a couple of reasons. First, I had a personal connection with some manifestations of my trend. In 1989, a couple of days after my oldest brother's wedding, 96 fans of my soccer team, Liverpool, were crushed to death when police and stadium officials allowed too many fans into a stadium. Over the next few days, the Kop, the most famous stand of the Liverpool stadium, was covered in a mountain of flowers, soccer scarves and paraphernalia, poems and photographs. There is still a Hillsborough memorial at the stadium festooned with flowers, at the center of which burns an eternal flame signifying that the dead fans will never be forgotten (<http://www.liverpoolfc.net/hillsborough/>).

I had also been a personal witness to the remarkable outpouring of grief over the untimely death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in November 1997, visiting the extraordinary scenes around the royal palaces in the center of London. Perhaps the most striking scenes were at Kensington Palace which was surrounded by an unimaginable amount of flowers, piled up to four foot high and several feet deep. Along with the flowers were notes, pictures, photographs and poems, some in envelopes, some covered in plastic to protect them from the rain. Most of the notes were addressed to Diana herself, although some were also addressed to her two young children. Standing in the misty grove of trees outside the front of the palace late at night, we saw memorial candles in the grass spelling out her name. Park furniture was festooned with flowers and people had hung notes, letters and poems from the branches of the trees. People even left their treasured possessions outside the palace in her memory.

These two events exemplify the shift from a predominantly Protestant public sensibility about death to a more Catholic one. Liverpool was traditionally a Catholic soccer club, battling against its local Protestant rival, Everton. It is also noteworthy that the Reverend David Hope, the second ranking figure in the Church of England, condemned the public's reaction to Diana's death as emotional wallowing.

My second reason for bringing my trend was connected to my own personal religiosity. I have been infected with the Carlebach bug and now attend a synagogue renowned for its deeply expressive Friday night service full of singing and dancing. There is something so liberating about a synagogue service in which emotional display and joy are not seen as threatening to decorum. This commitment to a more expressive form of religiosity, however, can cause personal discomfort. To commemorate the twelfth *yahrzeit* for my mother, I placed some photographs of her that we have around our apartment on the dining table next to the *yahrzeit* candle. Juliette, my wife, commented that the pictures and candle, together with the flowers left over from Shabbat, made the whole scene look quite...well, how best to say it...Catholic! I shrugged acknowledgment at her observation, but it just seemed the right thing to do.

This trend toward a more expressive form of religion threatens the premise of the Protestant settlement between religions and the state, namely that one can expect people to amputate their religiosity and spirituality from their public life, thereby forcing religion into a more parochial role away from the real centers of power in society. It also shows, perhaps, the possibility of the emergence of popular forms of public religiosity that meet many of the needs formerly met by established religion and that blur the denominational boundaries that have proved so divisive in the past.

Another way in which religion might be transformed by a shift in the church/state boundary was raised at the recent scenario conference hosted by CLAL's think-tank, the Jewish Public Forum (JPF). The conference brought together a talented group of theologians, business people, anthropologists and community leaders to construct alternative scenarios for the future that illustrated the various ways that contemporary cultural and technological trends might impact on Jewish life and institutions. The group that I facilitated created a narrative in which religious groups began to downplay attempts at conversion or dictating public morality in order to win state contracts to become providers of social and welfare services. This would echo the shift by British Quakerism away from missionizing and toward ethics and social and political action in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Regardless of the likelihood of this outcome, what the exercise demonstrates is that we should not assume that a change in the church/state boundary would leave either religion or the state unchanged. Perhaps there may be public roles for religion that emphasize public ritual and spiritual expression or good works without endangering that which detractors of President Bush seek to defend: the right of each and every citizen to participate fully in public life without regard to religious convictions. And perhaps these spontaneous shrines are merely the sign of more, and maybe better, things to come.



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