THEO 5500 “Religion and American Public Life”

Instructor: Thomas Massaro, S.J

Meeting time for fall 2018: Tuesday, 9:00 to 11:30

Course description
The USA has been described by various parties as both a “Christian nation” and a secular democratic experiment. The clashing expectations evident in the disparity of these descriptions rise to the surface in legislative battles and judicial decisions that from time to time roil the waters of our democratic polity in especially turbulent ways. As a highly pluralistic society, the United States experiences persistent tension among members of its varied religious communities and with more secular-minded members of its citizenry. What may we reasonably expect from our social institutions regarding respect for religious freedom? How many of our faith-inspired values may we hope to incorporate into the public functioning of society? Even if we reject the extremes of theocracy (religious voices exerting exclusive control over public life) and utter secularism (where religion is thoroughly privatized and marginalized in public life as a matter of principle), there is still much hard work to do even to maintain the uneasy balance we inherit. The terms of membership in our national community and participation in the institutions are constantly being renegotiated. Anyone who aspires to play a leadership role in any religious community does well to invest considerable energy in examining the issues of religion and public life in this fascinating context.

The questions that will guide this course include these: What are the proper parameters for religious expression in public life? What style of faith-based public engagement is most constructive and effective? Has the United States adequately accommodated religious expression, or does our legal system trivialize religious devotion? How can religious people be good citizens, following standards of behavior that neither shrink from a full embrace of their confessional identity nor in any way disparage people of other faiths or no faith at all? What guidance can we discover in exemplary figures of previous generations, in the Roman Catholic community and beyond? How may our civic institutions (such as courts and government regulatory agencies) honor the Constitution’s religion clauses and act in ways that in no way disadvantage people of faith or people who might object to specific religious content in public affairs?

In exploring these questions, we will maintain a solid but not exclusive focus on Catholic contributions, such as the work of John Courtney Murray, S.J., on religious liberty and conscience. We will also consider such topics as civil religion, “culture wars,” secularization, religion in the media, faith-based lobbying, a religiously-inspired voting ethic, and the roles of civil society and public theology in contemporary society.

Requirements: Students will read approximately 100 pages per week, offer one in-class presentation, write a short mid-term essay on faith and politics, and research a longer final paper on a topic of their choice related to the course.

There are no formal pre-requisites for this course, but students will benefit from some previous knowledge of social ethics, political science and American history.