

In Jesus' day, being a high priest was like being a puppet. There was a time in Israel's history when the high priest was the head of the temple and the virtual governor of Judea, a position he held by birth, much like royalty. He attended summits with leaders of other nations, directed the internal revenue service, and shaped the spiritual welfare of the people. The high priest served for life, like a supreme court justice. But by the time of Christ, Herod had stripped high priesthood of its authority, appointed people from non-traditional families -- some of whom bought their way in -- and made the role ceremonial.

When the letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus a high priest, it has political implications. The religious imagery is clear. The high priest was responsible for the Day of Atonement. He offered sacrifice in the temple once a year to take away the sins of the people. Jesus, acting out that religious imagery, entered the temple of heaven through his death, taking with him not the sacrifice of an animal, but the sacrifice of his own life. But his role has political implications as well. Herod did not appoint Jesus high priest. God appointed him. When Hebrews says, in Jesus, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses," it was because people had seen plenty of those. Jesus was like the people. He was tested in every way. He suffered. He prayed. To say Jesus is high priest is to say he is Lord not just of the church but also of state.

In our country, the preference to separate church and state sometimes reaches hysterical proportions. On any given Sunday, there are more people in churches than there are attending sporting events. But no television station divides the 3 minutes it gives to sports every night accordingly: 2 minutes to religion, 1 minute to sports. In any given school, those who believe in God far outnumber those who don't. But our nation's students cannot pray out loud -- except possibly before football games in Texas. The Ten Commandments are banned from the walls of public buildings, nativity scenes from the front. In our morning paper today there was more coverage about underwear than there was about Good Friday. Separation of church and state is one thing. The marginalization of church, the silencing of church by the state is another. The state may have nailed Jesus to a cross, but he reigns as high priest over all.