

The problem with Vance's conversion wish

American democracy was designed to separate the state from the church. Its leaders are now blurring the lines

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AREENA ARORA



U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance and his wife Usha Vance in Washington, DC. | Photo Credit: AFP

At a recent event, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance hoped that his wife Usha Vance, who is Hindu, will convert to Christianity some day. Politicians rarely speak by accident. When an elected leader treats his faith as the ultimate ideal for everyone, including his wife, it ceases to be personal. The impulse to share easily becomes an impulse to shape, putting policy in a direct test against the gospel.

A day later, he doubled down on his remarks. “Christians have beliefs. And yes, those beliefs have many consequences, one of which is that we want to share them with other people. That is a completely normal thing, and anyone who’s telling you otherwise has an agenda,” he posted on X.

Conversion and conquest

While modern political rhetoric is worlds apart from 15th-century decrees, Mr. Vance’s public comments evoke a disquieting historical parallel. They are a reminder of a centuries’ old phenomenon when monarchs, backed by papal authority, conquered and converted people in the name of faith.

Mr. Vance’s comment at the time of his baptism six years ago — that his “views on public policy and what the optimal state should look like are pretty aligned with Catholic social teaching” — and his remarks now echo an older project: the religious justification for the expansion of empire. The belief that the Christian religion must shape public order is the same civilisational justification that fuelled Europe’s conquest of the world. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull called *Inter Caetera* which became known as The Doctrine of Discovery, commanding adherents to colonise and convert native people. Any land not inhabited by Christians was to be claimed and converted to the Catholic faith.

The Pope’s decree sanctified expansion, subjugation, and enslavement under the guise of salvation. The voyages for discovery that followed unleashed inarguably one of the most repressive, bloody, and genocidal eras in human history. European dominance did not spread merely because of brute force, but by projecting Christian norms as the sole right way for civilisation to flourish, writes Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, in his essay ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’.

Mr. Vance is not alone. Two years ago, the Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, called the separation of church and state a “misnomer.” Lawmakers in Texas and Louisiana, which are Republican strongholds, have passed legislation to mandate the display of the Ten Commandments in classrooms. All these advance the same narrative: that American democracy draws legitimacy from the Bible.

The founding of America

The country's founders, however, set out to reject that premise. In 1776, America's rebellion was not only against monarchy but against theocratic authority. The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of God; it anchors its sovereignty in the people. Article VI of the Constitution forbids any religious test as a qualifier for public office. The First Amendment protects five fundamental freedoms, among which is the freedom of religion, barring Congress from establishing any official religion and prohibiting interference in religious exercise. Mr. Vance's comments stray from the intent of the amendment, using Catholicism as a form of virtue signalling. Founding father James Madison wrote an influential petition laying out 15 arguments against the government's support of churches. Religion, he argued, "can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence." Thomas Jefferson's bill for religious freedom affirmed the separation of the church and state and laid the foundation for religious liberty in the U.S. This principle distinguished the democratic vision the U.S. promoted in the 18th century from societies still shaped by church authority.

Conditional equality

That wall is now being eroded. Republican leaders speak of a Christian revival as a path to national renewal, conflating religion, specifically theirs, with patriotic values. When the state privileges one creed, equality becomes conditional. Non-Christian citizens, including the Vice President's wife; immigrants; and secular Americans are subtly told that they mean less even as ordinary Americans are moving in the opposite direction. As per a 2025 Pew Research Center study, the share of adults identifying as Christian is falling while that of the religiously unaffiliated has grown.

The political insistence on a 'Christian America' is tone-deaf. Faith is not the problem — Christianity, like every major faith, can inspire compassion, justice, and humility. But when it becomes an instrument of governance, it betrays those very principles. A faith secure in itself does not need state power to sustain it. America's founding fathers understood this: liberty of individual conscience was too sacred to be legislated. A government claiming divine mandate cannot remain accountable. American strength has never come from uniform belief and conformity. The Constitution ensures that a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, and an atheist stand equal before the law. It protects the church from becoming a tool of politics, and politics from becoming an altar of faith.

Mr. Vance's remark reveals a world view that measures belonging by conversion. This is the same impulse that once justified brutal conquest. To hope for a growing church as a public official is to forget that the country's founding was an act of emancipation from precisely that.

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