

Lessons from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: The Consequences of Merging Government and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* dramatizes what happens when a government's authority and a church's doctrine become one, and this perspective piece uses the play to read contemporary church-state relations. Literary analysis of Puritan Salem is set beside three case studies arranged along a spectrum that runs from constitutional separation to theocracy. At one end, *Stone v. Graham* shows a court enforcing First Amendment neutrality by striking down Kentucky's mandate that public-school classrooms display the Ten Commandments. At the other, Taliban-governed Afghanistan shows religious law operating as state law, with severe limits on women's education, employment, and movement. Project 2025 sits between the two, an instance of indirect but consequential religious influence on proposed United States policy. Across the play and the cases the paper finds the same pattern: when theology steers the legal system, fear spreads, due process erodes, and injustice becomes systemic. Separating church from state, the author concludes, is what keeps governance equitable and individual rights secure.

KEYWORDS

Church, State, First Amendment, Religion, Federal Law

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Introduction

In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller explores the dangerous consequences of merging religious and government affairs through the actions of the Puritan court. The play is set in 1692 Salem and shows how the town's judges and ministers use religious beliefs to justify executions, blurring the line between faith and law, and how even slight doubt was treated as grounds for legal prosecution. One of the central characters, Reverend Hale, states, "Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack in a fortress may be accounted small" (Miller, 1953, p. 64). Because of this rigid mindset, the town becomes overwhelmed by fear, suspicion, and false accusations. Rumors quickly transform into legal evidence, and innocent people are condemned based on nothing more than superstition. The primary accuser, Abigail Williams, manipulates this fear-driven system by accusing others of witchcraft, using hysteria as a weapon to gain power and escape persecution. Miller uses these events to show how dangerous it can be when a government allows religious extremism to affect their justice system, ultimately leading to chaos, injustice, and the destruction of an entire community. This leads one to question: What are the implications of merging religious and government affairs?

Research Questions

Throughout history and even in modern day society, governments across the world have been intertwined with religion, both directly and indirectly. Supreme and lower-level court rulings, school policies, and women's rights are just a few of the domains affected when religion mixes with judicial and legislative authorities. The tension remains a question of where to draw the line between church and state, and whether the boundary is becoming less clear and more permeable over time. All over the globe, we can see different religious beliefs influencing how government officials make decisions, which can negatively impact those who don't share the same beliefs. Acknowledging this prompts us to question how a society decides when religion should guide the government, and thus invites the following research questions:

- How does theocracy affect fair trials and due process?
- How has the separation of church and state changed or shifted over time?
- In what ways do different religious beliefs influence government officials and their policies?

- What causes the tension or division between religion and government in modern society?

Preliminary Findings

10 Commandments in Public Schools

The 1980s witnessed a landmark case known as *Stone v. Graham* enter the U.S. judicial system. This case interrogated the legal basis of displaying the Ten Commandments in public schools. In its ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Kentucky law that required the Ten Commandments to be posted in every public-school classroom. It decided that the law was a clear violation of the First Amendment mandating the separation of church and state because the Ten Commandments is a religious document, and posting them in schools, especially without any historical or educational context, would amount to government promotion of religion. While the state tried to argue that the posters featuring the Commandments were produced through private funding sources, the Court concluded that the origin of funding did not alter the fact that the state was endorsing a religious message. This case was essential in reaffirming the United States' longstanding separation of church and state, and its instructive that the government must remain neutral on religion, especially in public schools.

Debates around the First Amendment started long before the Stone case, however. For example, in an article focused on the separation of church and state published by the National Park Service (NPS) (2025), the organization writes, "The First Amendment prevents congress from creating or establishing a religion, and thereby prevents the power of the government from expanding beyond civil matters. The First Amendment also protects people's right to worship however they choose, or to not worship at all." The longevity of the First Amendment suggests that early settlers' desire to protect their religious freedoms was a large reason they came to America in the first place. Roger Williams, a minister and lawyer of the time, advocated for 'a high wall' separating church and state, stating that such a wall was essential to keeping the "'wilderness' of the human institutions out of the affairs of religion." Williams' commentary was thought to be a driving force and influential source of inspiration behind the development of the First Amendment. Roger Williams conceived of the government as both messy and unfair—as something that had to be contained and insulated from the undue influences of outside forces like religious doctrine. Interestingly, as a minister, he was more concerned with how government ideology could affect religious dogma. In fact, his apprehensions were largely motivated by colonialists' previous

experiences in England, where the Anglican Church mandated Episcopalian Christianity as the only acceptable religion. Adopting this historical approach, one can see how the First Amendment emerged not as a legal provision, but as an intentional safeguard rooted in lived experience.

In short, the *Stone v. Graham* case illustrates how the Supreme Court continues to protect the First Amendment by keeping government and religion separate, especially within educational contexts. The case speaks to the enduring quality of the ideals that guided early American leaders in their actions—ideals that underscore that the government should remain neutral in matters of faith so citizens can practice any religion or even no religion at all. By striking down the Kentucky law, the court reinforced the long-standing principle that public institutions cannot promote religious messages, keeping everyone's rights and freedom protected.

Women's Rights in Afghanistan

The early depictions of the struggle between church and state presented in *The Crucible's* 17th-century America exhibits further parallels with contemporary society if one considers its relevance to women's rights in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has long been controlled by the Taliban, a militant group that governs according to ultraconservative and absolute rule. As recently as 2021, the country's government has been completely reshaped under the group's strict interpretation of Islamic law known as Sharia Law. This shift has exerted a profound impact on everyday life for citizens throughout the nation, but especially for women and girls, who now find their personal freedoms related to pursuing education or moving freely throughout the region severely restricted. International organizations and human rights groups have criticized the Taliban's policies for restricting and violating what are generally considered unalienable rights, and in doing so, isolating Afghanistan from the global community.

Acquiring an in-depth understanding of the Afghan government, however, is crucial to appreciating the intersectional quality of politics, power, and human rights. In the case of Afghanistan, questions of the separation of Church and State are irrelevant; here, the Church is the State. A classic theocracy, Afghani leaders interpret religious scripture from the Qur'an to inform their legal codes, government policies, and regulatory practices. Interpreting the Afghan government's actions through the lens of theocracy helps explain the excessive restriction of women's rights, which are based on narrow and skewed interpretations of religious texts, not international understandings of civil rights. The United Nations published an article condemning the actions of the Afghani government, writing,

“Afghanistan’s Taliban rulers have followed through on decrees aimed at erasing women from public life in the country and restricting their freedom of movement” (United Nations, 2025). The “decrees” refer to religious laws issued by the Taliban leaders include “Erasing women from public life” by removing women from schools, jobs, government, parks, universities, and most public places. Women’s freedoms are further restricted as they must now be accompanied by a male guardian for travel and must obtain permission or authorization to leave their home.

The present state of affairs in Afghanistan under Taliban rule demonstrates the dangerous consequences that can occur when a government operates according to strict religious interpretations rather than global notions of civil rights. By enforcing ultraconservative policies, limiting women’s basic rights, and censoring the media, the Taliban has created a society where half its population is completely isolated from the community and the rest of the world. Treating the case of Afghanistan as both an illustrative case and cautionary tale, the dangers of mixing faith and government become clear as it leads to discrimination, inequality, and a loss of fundamental human rights.

Project 2025

Turning now to consider the enduring relevance of *The Crucible* in the more local context of the United States, Project 2025 provides another concrete example of the dangers of intermingling Church and State. Project 2025 is a policy plan created by the politically conservative Heritage Foundation that outlines major changes a future conservative president could make to the federal government. The plan includes restricting LGBTQ+ individuals’ marriage rights, women’s reproductive rights, reshaping education, and redefining social policies around traditional values. Many scholars and critics argue that this plan reflects Christian nationalism, an ideology that believes the government (in this case, the United States government) should be guided by Christian principles and that Christian principles should guide government decisions. While the document does not openly call for a Christian-based government, it nonetheless emphasizes biblically framed definitions of family, morality, and individual rights. This raises concerns as to what would happen if the plan was implemented: If a singular religion reigns supreme, what happens to all others?

Democracy Forward (n.d.) shared a full breakdown of the 900-page mandate published by the Heritage Foundation, which the organization describes as a longstanding conservative think tank with very narrow ideas and one clearly guided by their own religious-aligned political agenda. The organization concludes that Project 2025 is “a systemic, ruthless plan to undermine the quality of life of millions of Americans, remove critical protections and

dismantle programs for communities across the nation, and prioritize special interests and ideological extremism over people." (Project 2025, n.d.). As this characterization suggests, Project 2025 is not just a political proposal but a broad, aggressive plan with the potential to harm many. In saying it would "undermine the quality of life" and "dismantle programs," the author of this article suggests that the policies would weaken protections that communities rely on such as healthcare access, civil rights, or social support programs. The Heritage Foundation, which never mentions any direct tie to one religion or another, clearly prioritizes their own ideological position and that policies reflect their religious beliefs, which are collectively presented in the veiled rhetoric of "helping to meet the needs of the general population." The case of Project 2025 shows the same concerns Arthur Miller shared when he wrote *The Crucible* back in 1953 remain perennial issues.

Discussion

Each of the above cases provides an example where religious beliefs are connected to the very laws or policies that shape public life—be it through displaying religious texts in public schools, enforcing religious laws on a national level, or proposing policies that are grounded in religious ideology. Regardless of the specifics of each case, all raise concerns about what happens when government power is used to promote or enforce religious values, especially when those values are not shared by everyone. Each example also encourages the interrogation of and reflection of the very notion of "freedom": freedom of religion, freedom from the state, and the freedom to pursue certain protections under the law.

While all of these parallels exhibit a central theme of freedom from religion, the difference lies in how extremely they are implemented or how drastically they limit the civil rights and liberties of the citizens. In *Stone v. Graham*, the U.S. Supreme Court actively prevented religion from being promoted in public schools, reinforcing separation of church and state. In contrast, Afghanistan under the Taliban represents a theocracy, where the government is directly built on religious law, leading to extreme restrictions on women's rights. Project 2025 falls in between these two examples because it does not openly establish a religious government, but it reflects strong religious influence in policy ideas, raising concerns about future impacts. Together, these differences show a spectrum ranging from strict separation to partial influence, to full religious control of government.

Concluding Remarks & Future Implications

After analyzing the analytical cases of *Stone v. Graham*, women's rights in Afghanistan, and Project 2025, one may better understand why the separation of church and state is so important. These examples show that when religion becomes too involved in government, people's rights, especially those of women and minority groups are compromised. In the United States, we use court cases to determine if the government is violating the first amendment of the Constitution that is meant to protect religious freedom by keeping the government neutral. While the Afghanistan example demonstrates the extreme consequences of a government fully controlled by religious law without a check on that power like our courts. Project 2025 helped me realize that there are indirect religious influences on policy makers that can still threaten equality and personal freedoms. Overall, this research made me reflect on how easily rights can be taken away when one belief system is prioritized over others, and why protecting separation of church and state is essential to maintain fairness and freedom in a society

The goal moving forward is to remember history so that it does not get repeated. In the case of church and state, we have seen the negative consequences of when a government uses religion for control and fails to protect individual rights and prevent discrimination. Governments should maintain a clear separation between religion and state. Public policies and laws should be based on civil rights, constitutional principles, and equality rather than religious beliefs. This includes ensuring that public institutions, such as schools and courts, remain neutral and inclusive of people from all backgrounds. Governments should also actively protect vulnerable groups, especially women and minorities, from policies that limit their freedoms. By reinforcing constitutional protections and promoting respect for religious diversity, societies can prevent the harmful consequences seen when religion is used to control government power and instead ensure freedom and fairness for all.

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