

RELIGION AND..

Faith and the Public Order

I have never understood the doctrine of separation of church and state to mean that religion has no role in politics. The question raised by recent events is not *whether* but *how* religion and politics ought to mix.

Consider how much this debate has shifted in the past twenty-five years. I remember how, on April 8, 1960, as a young congressman from Indiana, I introduced at Notre Dame a young senator from Massachusetts then on his way to nomination and election as the first Roman Catholic president of the United States. And I remember too the intensity, in Indiana and elsewhere, of anti-Catholic sentiments during that campaign and how John Kennedy was repeatedly pressed not to assert his religious convictions but to deny that he spoke for his church or that his church spoke for him.

In his famous speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association before the election, Kennedy declared:

I do not accept the right of any ecclesiastical official to tell me what I shall do in the sphere of my public responsibility as an elected official....

Whatever issue may come before me as president—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling, or any other subject—I will make my decision in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictate.

In the 1984 presidential election, on the other hand, the situation was sharply reversed. Candidates and major public officials, most prominently Geraldine Ferraro, were challenged to explain why their decisions as public officeholders did not always conform to the tenets of their church and to their own religious convictions.

Now, if I have said "yes" to the question "Does religious faith have a place in public life?" I must at the same time insist that there be limitations on the relationship; and I should like, therefore, to suggest some guidelines to help us distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate mixtures of religion and politics.

The first guideline concerns the level at which religious convictions are most properly applied in public debate. It seems obvious to me that our faith can—and should—be a source of guidance on basic values; yet I think it equally clear that we must be wary of those who insist—when it comes to public policy—that a principle of religious belief presents only one solution. Here I am in agreement with

New York's Governor Mario Cuomo that, whereas we may be enjoined to accept the teachings of our faith,

In the application of those teachings—the exact way we translate them into political action, the specific laws we propose, the exact legal sanctions we seek—there...is no one, clear, absolute route that the Church says, as a matter of doctrine, we must follow.

To insist stridently that there is only one way that a general principle of religion or morality should be written into the laws of the land comes dangerously close to using the instrument of government to impose doctrinally specific views on those who do not share them.

Certainly my respect for the rights of adherents to minority religions and of nonbelievers was among the reasons that, as a member of Congress, I opposed legislation to permit organized prayer in public schools. Opposition to such prayer has been voiced, I note, by nearly every main-line Protestant church in this country as well as by most of the principal leaders of the Jewish community. Moreover, as the distinguished theologian John C. Bennett has noted, "Private prayer is voluntary and legal now!"

Let me make clear that I am not saying that religious leaders and others should refrain from speaking out for or against specific public policies or on single issues of government policy. Rather, I am asserting that, when they do speak, they in effect remove themselves from their positions of religious authority and become mundane—in the sense of earthly—political actors. Whatever they propose must be evaluated through the political process, according to the standards of feasibility and judgments about the public good that hold for all citizens of a democratic society.

But there is another point that must be made here. It is one that Joseph Cardinal Bernardin made in his Gannon Lecture at Fordham University last year, when he urged the Church to adopt what he called "a consistent ethic of life" rather than focus on just one issue, whether nuclear war or abortion. In a similar vein, Professor Robert Bellah of the University of California at Berkeley has observed that Ronald Reagan is highly selective in his choice of areas in which there is a link between religion and public morality. In Bellah's words: "How can one hold that there is a relationship when it comes to matters of school prayer and abortion but not when it comes to matters of poverty, civil rights, and the prevention of nuclear war?"

In this respect, I remember well that the right-to-life advocates who used to visit me in Congress never said a word in support of legislation I was writing to help educate poor children and handicapped children and to provide services to the elderly or the disabled. The silence of my

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constituents on these issues of human life was eloquent—and distressing.

Candor also compels me to remark that many observers have noted that during the recent national campaign the Catholic bishops, despite their advocacy of “a consistent ethic of life,” targeted only one candidate for attack and confined themselves to only one issue. These observers have reminded us that despite a sharp divergence between the bishops’ letter on war and peace and both the record of the Reagan administration and the planks of the Republican platform at Dallas, the bishops voiced no similar criticism of Reagan and Bush.

In like fashion, such observers—who range from the *Washington Post* columnist Haynes Johnson to the Roman Catholic priest and St. John’s University professor Paul Surlis—note that the bishops’ pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, seemingly a near frontal attack on the administration’s domestic policies, was not released until after the election.

My second guideline for relating religion and politics follows from the first but is more a matter of tone than of scope or substance. It is that when we appeal to religious convictions in political life, we should do so in a spirit of tolerance and humility and not with self-righteousness. We must beware of those who claim for themselves a monopoly on morality and truth in any realm, but especially in politics. Groups like The Moral Majority and Christian Voice that call for the defeat of candidates on so-called moral grounds and that rank public officials on “biblical scorecards” distort the political process. What kind of “morality” assigns a zero to Congressman Paul Simon and former Congressman Robert Drinan—the first a devoted Lutheran layman and the second a Jesuit priest—and a perfect, 100 per cent to a congressman convicted in the Abscam scandal?

Similarly, a letter sent on behalf of the Reagan campaign by Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada to 45,000 Christian ministers attempted to make God a Republican county chairman—well, national chairman!—by warning the clergymen that “as leaders under God’s authority we cannot afford to resign ourselves to idle neutrality.”

Instead of such arrogance, I would urge on the part of those who invoke religion in the political process a degree of self-restraint, not to say humility. Religious leaders in particular should remind their followers that solutions other than the ones they propose are possible and appropriate and that they should be scrupulous in upholding the right of others to disagree in the public arena. To do otherwise is to make innuendos of faithlessness and even heresy that unfairly constrain debate. We must never forget the message that Abraham Lincoln delivered to a war-torn nation on the occasion of his second inauguration as president: “Both [parties in the Civil War] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other....”

Reinhold Niebuhr warned us that religious pluralism itself depends on a sense of our own imperfection:

Religious diversity...requires a very high form of religious commitment. It demands that each religion, or each version of a single faith, seek to proclaim its highest insights while yet preserving a humble and contrite recognition of the fact that all actual expressions of religious faith are subject to historical contingency and relativity.

Religious faith therefore ought to be a constant fount of humility.

The price of arrogance, pride, of self-righteousness in the expression of religious convictions in political life is very steep indeed. Even today we hear echoes of idolatry, religious chauvinism, and political triumphalism in claims that America is a “Christian nation.” Not so. America is a nation of Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, and nonbelievers. We must ever acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate that religious and secular heterogeneity. For it is precisely in welcoming such diversity that we keep our society free.

The two guidelines so far discussed apply to the content and the tone of the relation between religion and the public order. The third guideline concerns the objective of that relationship, which, in my view, should be—as Governor Cuomo said eloquently in his speech at Notre Dame last fall—to fashion a working consensus on matters of public morality.

Concerns rooted in religious teachings influence both law and the policies of government most effectively and legitimately when they have gathered broad support. Of course, changes in law and policy also contribute to altering standards of public behavior. Ideally, however, the morality encoded in our laws represents a shared understanding of the common good. That morality ought not be the reflection of any one faith but of the varied traditions, secular and religious, of our nation.

As an obvious illustration of how religious leaders can contribute to building consensus on issues that unquestionably have implications for public policy, I cite the recent pastoral letters of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Both the letter on nuclear war and peace and the letter on poverty and the U.S. economy take strong moral stands. Yet both letters also stress principle over technique; allow for, indeed encourage, debate over the implementation of the principles; and urge Catholics to work in *various* ways toward progress on the *same* objectives: reducing the threat of war and the circumstance of poverty. Both letters have, in fact, sparked considerable discussion and disagreement within the Roman Catholic Church. As the theologian John Courtney Murray once put it: “Pluralism implies disagreement and dissension within a community [as well as] agreement and consensus.” So that while we must marshal our convictions toward achieving consensus, we must also live peacefully with people whom we consider, by our particular standards of right and wrong, to be sinners.

The year just passed and those just ahead promise intense strains on the relationship between our varied faiths and the public order. Perhaps the guidelines suggested here will prove helpful as thoughtful persons seek to relate their belief to the rough and tumble of politics in the American democracy.

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