



Religion and Public Life: A Partnership of Convenience or Conviction?

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The marriage of politics and religion does not result in an easy relationship, and it is one that both the political community and the religious community must approach with care. The United States has emerged with a working relationship between the religious sphere and the political, each influencing the other, but with neither playing a dominant role in the life of the other. That has proved to be healthy both for religion and for government. But we did not reach this point easily, and we will not proceed from here with ease. There are bumps in the road ahead, and people will shout advice at each junction on the road.

I. BUMPS IN THE ROAD: CONVICTION AND COMPROMISE

One of the reasons for conflict in church-state relationships is that the nature of making political decisions involves compromises that have to be worked out between two or more points of view. If that did not happen, democratic government would be ineffective and replaced by some form of dictatorship. Those of us in politics recognize that practical compromises have to take place. Whatever our religious moorings, few of us in political life claim any certainty that we know God's will on a given issue. In political life compromise (that is not a compromise of principle) is not a dirty word and is essential to the process.

The religious leader generally believes his or her dogmas come from God, and that makes compromise difficult. You cannot compromise what God has told you to do or believe. And even when religious leaders meet to discuss differences, rarely is the word "compromise" ever used. When Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians meet and reach agreement on the centuries-old divisive doctrine of justification, the wire services announce that "an understanding" has been achieved. The word "compromise" is not used, and pro-

bably none of the participants would concede that either side made any compromise.

When the inflexibility of religious dogma is applied to political life, then practical compromises that are necessary for progress sometimes cannot follow.

My impression is that those at the pinnacle of leadership in the major religious bodies understand that. But there is a zeal on the part of some of their followers, and some of the television preachers, that is appreciably less understanding; The desire to be part of a small group holding truth and fighting for it against the forces of evil has appeal to followers, sometimes too much appeal.

Not too many years ago, Missouri Synod Lutherans—of which I am one—had, as a regular part of our Sunday prayers, a special prayer of thanks that God had given us pure

doctrine. We prayed this at the same time we denounced Roman Catholicism for accepting the doctrine of papal infallibility. What we were really saying was, “We’re infallible, not you.” Three of my high school years were spent at a Lutheran high school. I shall never forget hearing the instructor in a religion class, a member of the Lutheran clergy, estimate that ninety-five percent of those in heaven would be Lutherans. I have since learned about the Rutherfordites, who believed that only 144,000 people would make it to paradise, until their numbers exceeded 144,000, and then the doctrine was changed.

To be part of a religious elite that has a monopoly on the ultimate truths is emotionally satisfying, but having been so anointed, it becomes dangerous when these emotionally-charged certainties are applied to political life.

Unfortunately, history is filled with such examples. Northern Ireland and Lebanon are examples today. The substance of faith has given way to cultural tradition and division, and zealots on each side—applying their faith to political life in an unthinking way—kill in the name of religion. I shall never forget waking up one morning in Washington, automatically turning on the all-news CBS station, and the first words I heard were: “Christian mortar fire today hit the Moslem section of Beirut.” What a strange phrase: Christian mortar fire. Political compromises are difficult in Lebanon today, not only because of the necessity of giving up power by some who hold it, but because the situation is complicated by generations of animosity between religious groups. Political compromise becomes more tortuous because it takes on the coloration of a compromise of faith, a compromise of revealed dogma.

Moslem fundamentalism could be a force for good in Iran, but when tied too closely to that nation’s political course, it harms Iran, and it brings into disrepute the religious tenets. The same can be said of Jewish fundamentalism or Christian fundamentalism or of Lutheranism or Catholicism. An insight into truth gives no one a monopoly on truth applied to all situations.

Harmful political zealotry need not be tied to religion. Communism is a prime example. There are many other examples, unfortunately. But too tight a merger between political leadership and religious leadership is almost certain to lead to zealotry and abuse. Slavery is now part of humanity’s history, but we should avoid imposing a new servitude that grows out of applying religious dogmas to political life with great certitude.

That is why I view with concern efforts to amend the constitution to provide prayer in the schools. Congressman Dan Glickman, who is Jewish, relates his fourth grade experience of growing up in overwhelmingly Christian Wichita, Kansas. Each morning, when the fourth grade class opened with prayer, little Danny Glickman was excused while the others prayed. Each morning Danny Glickman was being told he was different, and each morning all the other students were being told Danny Glickman was different. Do we really want that in our country? There are functions that government can perform well, like building highways and providing aid to students. But promoting religion is not a function that government performs well. Let government provide fire protection for all religious buildings; let government provide aid to students who go to colleges, both public and private and church-related. But once government starts to promote prayer, a whole host of knotty questions arise. Let prayer be taught in the homes and churches and synagogues-and reading, writing and arithmetic in the schools. There is a fine line between making fire protection available to all and promoting religion in the schools. In both

cases government is assisting religious institutions, but in one case properly and in the other, ultimately, with some danger.

II. FAITH AND POLITICAL LIFE

That does not mean that faith should not be applied to life by those of us in political life. It should. It is difficult to imagine the prophet Amos living today and not speaking out on the issues of social justice that plague us. Christ's admonition in Matthew 25 to help the hungry, the ill, the poorly clothed, the imprisoned, and others in need should not be ignored by those of us who have the temerity to call ourselves Christians.

But we should be cautious in asserting the connection between faith and a specific political action. We should embrace both belief and tolerance. In a strange way, political leaders embrace the doctrine of sin more than religious leaders sometimes do. For those of us in politics recognize that there is at least the remote possibility that we could be wrong. We recognize the imperfection that is part of our life. Religious leaders, who preach about the doctrine of sin and fallibility, sometimes are more reluctant to apply that doctrine to life.

The errors are not only in what we do, but what we fail to do. Where were the political and religious leaders who should have denounced the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II? One of the most discomfiting books I have read, David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), spells out in painful detail that both Christian and Jewish leaders were all too silent at Hitler's butchery of the Jews.

After the Baptist World Alliance met in Germany in 1934, the *Official Report of the Fifth Baptist World Congress* noted: "Chancellor Adolph Hitler gives...the prestige of his personal example since he neither uses intoxicants nor smokes."

The president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville cautioned "against too-hasty judgment of a leader who has stopped German women from smoking cigarettes and wearing red lipstick in public." A Boston pastor-delegate wrote: "It was a great relief to be in a country where salacious

sex literature cannot be sold...The new Germany has burned great numbers of corrupting books and magazines." I am not picking on the Baptists. It was a Germany that was half Lutheran and half Catholic that, for the most part, passively tolerated the rise of Hitler and his bestial behavior toward the Jews. During this period German theologians had spirited debates about the minutiae of the theological world, but they failed the most fundamental test in the dramatic need to apply the mandate of faith to the grim real world. There were some who did so, but their numbers were embarrassingly small.

The single document in our nation's history that best illustrates the application of faith to life is Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. In the midst of the most bitter war this nation has ever known, the chief executive of one side attacked slavery, but without a meanness of spirit toward the South that would be expected. To a nation yearning to be fired up by the President, he instead talked about the enemy the Union was fighting with these words: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other....Let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully." And then this deeply religious man who belonged to no church spoke of

the enemy in terms that perhaps no leader has ever done. He climaxed his speech, not with a diatribe against the foe, but with the unforgettable word: “with malice toward none; with charity for all” and called on this nation “to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” One month and ten days later he was shot at Ford’s Theater.

When he was a boy, Lincoln had seen the small Baptist church his family attended divided on the slavery issue. His father, Thomas Lincoln, had joined with the anti-slavery portion of the church. Someone in that church—probably not Thomas Lincoln—stirred the conscience of that church’s membership on the issue of slavery, and probably played a role in changing U.S. history. We also have the opportunity to shape history by our application of faith to the political arena, and the lesson of history is that it should be done with care.

Those in my profession of politics are not immune to the temptation to use religion for election goals. In the 1986 election, a Michigan congressman sent a letter to fundamentalists in his district appealing for their votes to help him “break the back of Satan.” Even politically that was a mistake. He lost. But more subtle appeals sometimes can prevail. Few candidates say that they belong to no church, though for some it appears to be a matter of convenience rather than conviction. They worship on the golf course rather than in a sanctuary, but often are the most ready with pious phrases on the proper occasion. There is something that strikes me as more honest about a Lincoln who said he belonged to no church, but attended Presbyterian services regularly, than someone who claims an affiliation that is never observed.

But I move onto thin ice when I start making judgments. I have a hard enough time understanding my own motivations, much less attempting to probe those of others.

The point is that the electorate should not make political judgments on the basis of religious affiliation. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” is good, sound biblical advice. Neither a carefully paraded religious affiliation nor an

unctuous religiosity that suddenly emerges before an election is a signal of statesmanship. “I don’t know whether I believe in God,” a friend in congress told me, telling of the inner struggle he was going through. I have much greater respect for him than for the noisily pious.

How does faith apply to life? For me it includes:

- Helping the unemployed and less fortunate.
- Reversing the arms race.
- Helping to lift the burden of apartheid from South Africa.
- Seeing to it that the world’s hungry have a better chance.
- Promoting the cause of education.
- Getting our fiscal house in order.

But am I not simply wrapping my political beliefs in religion? Perhaps. I can cite religious sources of doing each of these—but Jerry Falwell can also for his very different choices. Are the reasons for my conclusions more soundly grounded in religious principles than his? I think so, but in fairness, so does he.

The one theme that comes through in both the Old and New Testaments is standing up for

the less fortunate. In contrast, the law of the jungle is for the strong to abuse the weak. The envoys of powerful ancient Athens told the residents of the small island of Melos, “You know as well as we do, that right...is only in question between equals in power. The stronger do whatever they can and the weaker suffer whatever they must.” But faith demands a different approach. The command of Christianity and Judaism, and probably most other faiths, is to balance things, to stand up for the less fortunate. But historically too often our religious and political leaders have been tempted by power rather than goaded by faith, and the less fortunate suffer. Respectability at the country club is substituted for concern for the homeless.

Having said that, it is also true that we should do more than sit in one corner of a dispute, feeling good and virtuous and put upon. Sometimes we grow comfortable in our antagonisms, rather than go through the discomfort of searching for answers that can bring us closer to our goals. Both sides shout at each other on the issue of abortion, distorting the views of the other, questioning the sincerity of the opposition. Does that mean there can be no common ground, nothing constructive done? Simple solutions are not available, but those who are sophisticated enough to dig beyond the bumper sticker slogans might note a report from the National Academy of Sciences that in 1986 there were one million teen-age pregnancies, 400,000 of which ended in abortions. We know something about the teen-age pregnancy pattern: Where young people are given an extra lift educationally, teen-age pregnancy rates go down. Even more dramatic is the evidence linking unemployment rates to teen-age pregnancy. In an area where there is high unemployment—regardless of its ethnic makeup—there is a high teen-age pregnancy rate. If we were to make employment as much of a national priority as many nations do, teen-age pregnancies and abortions would drop. Improve educational opportunity for those from disadvantaged homes, and the teen-age pregnancy rate drops. Tackling issues like education and unemployment is much more complicated and less emotionally satisfying than carrying a sign in a parade, but if the concern is genuine—and it is—then real answers should be sought, not simplistic ones.

Assuming the sincerity of others—whatever the issue—is not only a generally accurate assumption from which to start; it is also a basis for compromise that is sensed by those with whom you work. If the other person senses that you respect him or her, that establishes a totally different tone for the dialogue that follows. If someone approaches me on an issue and clearly indicates by small signals that he or she believes I am not sincere, it is almost impossible to have dialogue that is anything other than confrontational. But the same works the other way around. If I approach others with an attitude of antagonism, they are not likely to be moved by anything I say.

III. LEARNING AND GROWING

Finally, as we make judgments about people and their political/religious views, let us keep in mind that people can, and sometimes do, grow. Lincoln did. The rough-hewn young New Salem resident hardly seemed destined to become the man who freed the slaves and become our most popular president. In freeing the slaves, he had the backing of public opinion, in part because of two events: the publication and wide reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the slaying by a mob of the abolitionist editor, Elijah Lovejoy, in 1837 and the public outcry that followed it.

But Lovejoy did not start out as an abolitionist. Here are two of numerous ads that appeared in Lovejoy's *St. Louis Times* that would not appear later: "FOR SALE—A likely Negro woman with six children. The woman is between 30 and 35 years of age, and the two oldest children, twins, are between 10 and 11 years old. They will be sold for cash. Apply at this office." Here's another: "\$40 reward. Ran away from the subscriber on the 23rd, a Negro man named John. He is about five feet high, well proportioned, and has a large dent across his nose." The publisher of those ads later gave his life to fight slavery. Elijah Lovejoy grew. The Strom Thurmond I serve with in the Senate does not approve of all of my votes, but he is a vastly different Strom Thurmond than the man who headed the Dixiecrat efforts in 1948. He has grown. Jerry Falwell (who describes me as "a religious bigot") once was a leader in defending the cause of segregation. He has grown.

All of us can learn and grow. Each of us lives our faith inadequately and applies it imperfectly.

We are not just, but we can be searchers for justice.

We are not always understanding, but we can pursue understanding.

We are not always right, but we can seek what is right.

We do not hold the truth, but we can search for the truth.

We do not have peace, but we can come much closer to it.

We do not see the future clearly, but we can improve our vision for a better nation and a better world.