

Political Uses of Religion; Religious Uses of Politics

by Hans Tiefel, revised October 2013

Religion and politics: Context

The First Amendment to our Constitution decrees that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....” This distinction appears easier in rhetoric and theory than in actual practice. Nevertheless, given the history of the Inquisition, European religious wars and current Islamic efforts to make sharia (Islamic law) the law of the land, when it comes to religion and government, it makes sense to say both Yes (freedom to practice) and No (no government establishing religion).

While this nation may have been founded by immigrants who sought to escape religious oppression and who insisted on religious practice as a right in creating a new nation, we now live in a secular culture. To be sure, biblical faith has influenced American leaders and politicians and may continue to do so. Yet the United States is not now what some conservatives liked to call *our Christian nation*. Indeed the word *Christian* invoked in a political context elicits cautionary responses. The appeal to *Christian* hints at a narrow sectarian position linked with regressive politics. Moreover, the term seems to exclude many belonging to other faiths as well as to those who choose “none of the above.”

The word *politics* may evoke not only mistrust but cynicism. Forgotten campaign promises, refusal or inability to do the country’s governing, biased campaign ads, subservience to major donors, ideological intransigence -- all question whether anything good could come out of Washington. And as to religion, pragmatic politicians will keep religion in mind as long as religion remains popular among many voters. Donate to my campaign and vote for me, for your fears, resentments, and hopes are mine as well. And so is your belief in God.

A politically useful deity

Before describing how politics uses religion in more detail, I shall explain how our secular culture has made God and religion *safe* and why that is not a good thing. While traditional religion still retains practitioners in places high and low, in a political context religion tends to become controlled, useful, and safe.

Each of the three Abrahamic religions proclaims that God is Lord. They point to the kingdom of God (originally a political term). This confession is political in the sense that not only is God Creator, Lord, Redeemer but that the very meaning and purpose of life, individually and communally, centers on God. Moreover, this God outranks all human authorities. Thus Judaism, Christianity, and Islam confess themselves to be servants or slaves of God. Even if the human

condition resounds with Adam's *No!* to God, in more faithful moments the prayer is for *not my will but yours be done*. To be done *on earth*. And that includes politics. This Abrahamic God is not a controlled and safe God! To be obeyed more than humans, loyalty to this God can get a person killed. Martyrs happen. This deity may grate against political career enhancement.

Religion Lite and Generic Religion

Practical politics, in its versions of Machiavellianism, has learned how to seem religious yet be safe at the same time. Even a secular culture retains practical political uses of religion. A tone of religiosity can grace most any occasion. From football games to commencement exercises, from political speeches to funerals, we invoke divine presence and blessings. Traditionally chaplains participate in opening sessions of Congress. Attending worship services and prayer breakfasts can still have a character-endorsing quality for aspiring politicians. We resist the church/state separation purists who want to eliminate *in God we trust* from our currency. That motto costs us nothing. It will not be pressed for any actual or literal meaning. It will not hamper national reliance on military power or nuclear deterrence. Besides, it sets our nation apart from a godless world of nations.

Political advantages of seeming to be religious resonate with convictions of national exceptionalism. That national quality of being different, set apart for some universal "calling" may be quite secular or even anti-religious. But it does resonate with a religious conviction that God has a special spot in his heart for the United States of America and calls us to a universal democratic mission. The notion of a mission to spread democracy to the rest of the world proves useful for an empire. One would then be invading other nations for their own good. *They will welcome us in Baghdad with open arms*. Political providence proves perennially appealing.

Interestingly, appeals to Providence leave the identity of the deity nebulous. And contemporary American political uses of religion insist on what one might call generic religion. It lacks specificity, appealing to an anonymous divine will for national direction rather than to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is unlikely to cite Moses or a Commandment. Nor will it invoke the name of Jesus or a teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Generic religion has the advantage of appealing to voters no matter what their religious shadings or preferences. There is not much in it when it comes to divine character or particular religious traditions.

The politics of God-is-for-us

May God bless America is the unfailing closing of every presidential speech. The one prayer we will never hear in such an address is the plea, *May God have*

mercy on America. For this political use of God-language, a.k.a. *civil religion*, proves itself always to be for us, never against us. Civil religion remains devoid of what scholars call prophetic religion. Israel's prophets were those critical and harsh voices, often in a politically smooth season, who denounced economic injustice and oppression of the poor in Ancient Israel. Perennially unpopular, it seems doubtful that such treasonous troublemakers would be invited to prayer breakfasts.

More seriously, a generic and always favorable appeal to religion in conjunction with the secular autonomy claimed for politics undermines any religious critique of the powers that be. A litigious age makes it very difficult for any institution to apologize. Even if only to say *sorry!*, much less to make amends. A recent Administration committed acts that many of us thought we, the people, would never do: torturing prisoners and kidnapping suspects. Yet all that was needed was a flexible political vocabulary: *enhanced interrogation* and *extraordinary rendition* not only camouflage such deeds but were declared to be legal. No political leader apologized for this recent past. And while there were religious critics, there was no institutional outcry in the name of God. *Mistakes were made* seems the most we will ever hear. And if there be remorse over the past, as for slavery, the lapse of at least a century seems reasonable for any hint of national regret. But it was not always so. Admission of national wrongs, especially in religious terms, were not unheard of in our nation's historical past.

Perhaps looking for national apologies or amends is unrealistic and unfair. To be sure, Christian liturgy and worship insists on the regular confession of sins, on repentance and on the need for forgiveness. But would any congregational or synodal confession ever include national sins?! *Forgive us for ... invading and destroying Iraq? ...for the chaos we created in Afghanistan? ... for the mortgage crisis from which so many still suffer? ...for our indifference to the poverty and lack to access to health care of so many of us?* And if such repentance eludes religious communal conscience or courage, it seems unreasonable to expect political national self-criticism, where the word *sin* is now an anachronism.

An analogy may summarize and close this section of the political uses of religion. Biblical religion used to be highly demanding, at times a matter of life or death. The will of God, especially in a political context could call for martyrs. God's will trumped all earthly powers. But not in a political religion made safe. The proverbial king of the beasts comes to mind. We can still see and marvel at the wild thing in safe settings, in zoos and circuses, behind moats and iron cages. But we need no longer fear it. We are now safe from it. Indeed we can tame it, teach it tricks and delight young and old alike. Such be the ways of our political uses of religion.

Religious uses of politics

Except for the earliest years of Christianity, the Christian church tended to make its peace with government authority and laws. The New Testament witness seems ambivalent. Romans 13:1, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God* retained its influence among Lutherans even in the Nazi era. Yet Revelations 13:1, written during Roman persecution of Christians, invokes apocalyptic images to denounce the Empire.

Paul's perspective in Romans won out. Government is intended by God to serve the common good. While initial Roman persecution scattered disciples across the Mediterranean, the Roman peace facilitated the lasting spread of the Christian faith. Prayers for rulers and for the blessings of good government have become indispensable parts of liturgical prayer.

But the dark view of government also survives. Especially of late we hear complaints about Big Government. The less government, the better. Shrink it down enough to drown it in a bathtub! While such voices identify with the political Right, the usual home of evangelicals, such fear and suspicion of government resonate more with Revelations than with Romans. These voices prove theologically suspect in locating evil in one rather than in all institutions. Moreover, if not for government, who will protect us from the abuses of Big Business whose loyalties aim at shareholder profit rather than the common good? Who will protect the public from speculative banks who caused the financial collapse of 2008? Can we dispense with the government inspection and control of food and drugs? And lest religion be left out, where can we expect protection from the hatred of religious ideologues and terrorists except from those pledged to protect this country? In short, while any institution can become harmful, government remains our main means of avoiding chaos, injustice, and endless suffering. If Big Government be our enemy, the chaos of the current Middle East should give us pause.

Religion and politics do not mix?

To give warning voices against mixing religion and politics their due, the blending of the two can be damned bloody. There is more than enough historical evidence of the toxic and fatal results of mixing faith and politics. The Crusades and the Wars of Religion were fought under religious banners. Killing in the name of God continues today. Economic and social oppression in the name of God seem timeless and endless. The European Enlightenment insisted on leaving God out of governing for good reasons. God save us from theocracy, rule by the religious! And thank God for the separation of church and state.

Yet relegating religious conviction to merely private, individual, or otherworldly matters proves to be unacceptable as well. Biblical scholars insist that divine revelation in biblical times was historical in the sense of relating to the public life of nations. If religious faith lacked political witness against poverty, oppression, injustice it would be mute or neutered in public life. Religious use of politics, I argue, should be much greater than it is. Whenever we care strongly about a right or a wrong, we insist that there be a law. Neither individual nor voluntary associations are able to respond adequately to the political and national needs and problems we face. Loving God as citizens demands political commitment and not just private generosity. Alleviating human suffering, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, helping the unemployed, improving schools, ... where to stop? -- transform politics into religious vocations of all Abrahamic believers. Indifference to large-scale human suffering, to the plight of one's own or of any of God's people, not being *grieved over the ruin of Joseph* (Amos 6:6), accuses us all.

Historical American political experience with connecting religion with politics surely remains mixed. Whether racism, slavery, exploitation of the poor, the domination of women by men and probably every other social evil, could be justified with religious texts and practices. Yet in the better moments of our American political past religious reformers played an indispensable role in mending our flaws. The abolition of slavery, the right of women to vote, the equal rights amendment created new and more just politics with the help of religious voices. They found support for such political reforms in biblical texts and communities of faith.

A different usefulness of religion

The contemporary secular separation of religion and politics may deprive political life of a major fulcrum with which to form political analysis, judgment and criticism. A humanistic ethics as well as challenging the powers that be with an appeal to our Constitution are platforms from which to seek a cure for what ails us politically. Yet ancient Israel's prophetic tradition has a longer track record for bringing a shared political life into perspective and into judgment. From the perspective of faith, since God is Lord of all, separating politics from religious witness becomes impossible. It would make God irrelevant in the sphere of who gets what, when, and where.

The language of religion in a political context:

Yet, while the prophetic or critical word was the agency that held nations accountable in the name of God, in a secular world public appeals to God might best be muted. The political context calls for a certain modesty in religious language. Making claims in the name of God in a secular culture can be

detrimental. Believers have used religious language as a club. How can one argue about the reasonableness of legislative proposals once someone uses the supposed trump card, *God says...*? Moreover, the word *Christian* is too easily identified with evangelicals who often stand on the political Right.

Reticence and caution about the endorsing or opposing political programs proves fitting also in the sense that there is no direct line from God to human political discernment. (Exceptions for Ancient Israel prophets?) The connection between God and our political ethics is more tenuous than logical deduction. The more modest aim -- in *How to think ethics*-- was *resonance* or *what proves fitting*. Whether secular or religious, moral judgments are human-made. It's best to leave religious trumps and infallibility to other contexts.

Therefore, when it comes to politics, the secular policy of leaving God out of it finds a happy parallel in the believers maxim of leaving *the word God* out of it. That need not imply that when it comes to public policy believers should remain incognito. It seems rather to constitute a fitting courtesy not to claim ultimate authority and truth on one's own behalf. There may be a more important and liberating conviction that supports such low key communication: The belief that God is good, seeks the human good, and the well-being of all creation. That confidence supports *the common good* as a shared goal for both secular and religious political vocabulary and ethics.

The importance of rights

That holds true for the appeal to political rights as well. *Rights* is a modern word and concept. It does not appear in biblical or traditional religious language. But what a blessing rights have been and remain for those on the margins of society. While invoking rights does not bear the same quality and measure as *love* (as in love of God and of neighbor), it serves love very well in keeping the worst from happening. *Rights* provides the emergency language of love.

As mentioned in *How to think Ethics*, the word *responsibility* fits the relational quality of faith. We find ourselves addressed by God and are called to respond. Moreover as citizens we are responsible for our communities, both small and large. And that might well guide our shared political vision and conduct. On the other hand, principles or *ideals* seem inimical to the language of faith. They remain abstract, pure and luminous, demanding yet lifeless. They are not life-giving and remain unforgiving. Utopian ideals, perfectionist absolutes tempt us but are not made for flesh and blood. So much for a language that would fit Christian political responsibility.

Christian political citizenship

I close with a note of gratitude to religious organizations dedicated to witness to God's love as Christian citizens in working to better the lives of the poorest among us by lobbying Congress. Lobbying is a practical religious use of politics. Surely every denomination and church has its own program to prevent and alleviate poverty and hunger. They call on their members to respond generously to every major disaster as well as to reach out to the world's poorest. Yet neither individual, synodal or national churches have the resources to meet or alleviate the actual needs. That remains a universal government task. Therefore Bread for the World lobbies Congress to support food programs with tax dollars. Similar lobbying presses for continuing food stamps, assistance to families, unemployment insurance, and the gamut of practical programs that sustain the least among us.

My model for lobbying is the Quakers or Friends, who have established a Legislative Committee in 1943. Quakers are among the Peace Churches, opposing all violence, including torture. Taking their bearings from the Beatitudes -- Blessed at the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt.5:9) -- they may not persuade politicians to become pacifists. But our political thinking may become less warlike. Or it may not. The Friend's Legislative Committee advocates for ways to love our enemies. Sending medicines to North Vietnam in 1967 despite US Government warnings may not have made our nation more peaceful. But it might serve as example of what it means to love our enemies.

Quaker lobbying expresses wider concerns than peace issues.

The poor, the dispossessed and the despised are to be lifted up and treated justly. Opposing violent solutions to the world's problem; fostering more equitable distribution of water, food, and medical aid; and ending nuclear proliferation all follow from Jesus' words.¹

"Quaker lobbying is a form of ministry to the nation."² It seeks to advance government policy to be more in line with what they understand as God's kingdom on earth. That is a political *testimony* -- to borrow a Baptist expression. It constitutes a political witness.

"...Friends through many generations have carried their concerns into the

¹ Margaret Post Abbott, A Theological Perspective on Quaker Lobbying (Friends Committee on National Legislation Educational Fund, 2012), p. 23.

² Abbott, Theological Perspective, p.5.

world.”³ Despite deep disagreements and after intense debates, they agree on what issues should take priority in lobbying Congress. Their commitment to community proves stronger than their disagreements. To disagree seriously and yet to remain a community of faith seems remarkable in an individualistic culture.

Would anything analogous to Quaker political witness be possible in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? That question forms a transition to the next topic in our theme of God, *Politics, and Citizenship*.

³ Ibid., p.25.