

RELIGION AND POLITICS: A Troubled Intersection

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I count it a special privilege to be invited to present this Colliver lecture tonight. This lectureship is a grand tradition. For me, it is also personal because the late Prof. George Colliver was my academic advisor and Bible professor here at Pacific more than fifty years ago. He was a gifted teacher and a wonderful friend to me and to generations of students. This lectureship is but a part of his legacy here, but it is an important part.

The relationship between religion and politics is always challenging; perhaps never more so than in recent years. I wish to speak of religion and politics tonight as “a troubled intersection.” Clergy who have ventured to preach on public issues are often criticized for “mixing religion with politics.” Conservative Christians resent hearing liberal views from the pulpit or reading them in denominational pronouncements. Liberals have been concerned about the power of the religious right, as exemplified by the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family. At the time of the last presidential campaign in 2004 some parts of the Roman Catholic Church came down hard on candidates perceived to have deviated from church teaching. A news item in the Rocky Mountain News of Denver Colorado illustrated this:

“A voters guide being distributed in some Colorado Catholic churches says candidates who support any of five ‘non-negotiable’ issues are not qualified to hold office and that Catholics must not vote for them. Those issues are abortion, euthanasia, fetal stem-cell research, human cloning and homosexual marriage. (The guide said that) ‘It is a serious sin to endorse or promote any of these actions, and no candidate who really wants to advance the common good will support any of the non-negotiables.’”

The group sponsoring this effort, which was also supported by Colorado bishops, clearly considers the relationship between Christianity and politics to be intimate. In fact, they consider this relationship to be so close that

certain political behaviors are accorded *status confesionis*—that is to say, to engage in those behaviors is to fall outside the faith. Similarly, but from a different perspective, theologians in South Africa issued a declaration during the *apartheid* era, announcing that that had *status confesionis*. And a German theologian, Ulrich Duchrow wrote that the present world organization of world economic life has *status confesionis*.

Absolutist conceptions of the relationship between specific public policies and Christian faith is a recurrent phenomenon in U. S. history. In his book, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*,¹ political scientist James A. Morone traces the origins and course of Puritan influence in American life. One strand of Puritanism deals with the faith in rigid, legalistic terms, applying it without a shred of insensitivity to politics and law. But Puritanism also developed in a different way into the Social Gospel movement. And that was concerned about poverty and inhumane working conditions. Both strands of Puritanism, however, illustrate persistent efforts to relate the gospel to politics. Morone writes that

“No aspect of the Puritan world is more often recalled than the notion of a mission, an errand in the wilderness sealed by a covenant with God.... Future generations would keep coming back to the heady dream of an American mission, a great experiment unfolding in the colonies while the rest of the world—all eyes—waited on the outcome. Later observers would sometimes take the image for a thumping, imperialist, manifest destiny.... the rush across the North American continent, the slaughter of the Native Americans, the crusades to save the world from pirates, kaisers, Nazis, Communists, or terrorists. But.... the key to the mission lay in making the society—the domestic, Puritan society—operate in a godly fashion.... The covenant with God—and the eyes of the world—positively pushed the early Americans to meddle in the behavior of their neighbors.” (Pp. 35-36)

¹New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003. Lest this lengthy volume be dismissed too readily because of its colorful title, I can affirm both its substance and insightfulness.

Chilling examples of political fanaticism based on religion are not, of course, limited to American history. In the contemporary world we have abundant illustrations, provided daily, especially, just now in the Middle East where extreme forms of Islam incite zealous followers to do terrible deeds. Christians who are too ready to define Islam by the terrorism of a minority of its adherents must reflect on their own history, including the Inquisition, the post-Reformation religious wars, and the Salem witch trials.

In face of atrocious behaviors by religious fanatics, it is no wonder than many honest Christians have concluded that what Thomas Jefferson called the “Wall of Separation between church and state” should be maintained, resolutely. Religious faith should be practiced privately, without complicating politics. These spheres should remain separate.

Why the intersection between Christianity and Politics is unavoidable

That is indeed a temptation: to keep religious faith and practice as far away from politics as possible. But Christians, at least, cannot yield to such a temptation. Why not? I offer three reasons why the relationship between Christianity and politics is both recurrent and necessary:

First, it is necessary *theologically* because divorcing religion and politics is to separate faith from application to the real world. One of the oldest of Christian heresies – perhaps the very oldest–sought to treat the faith as exclusively spiritual. Early docetism taught that Christ himself only appeared to be fully physical. Docetism maintained that the created world was not the work of the altogether spiritual God of Jesus Christ–but rather, it was created by an alien demiurge. Our spiritual well-being rests upon separating ourselves from all forms of materialistic influence. The view that faith is exclusively spiritual continues to be expressed by some Christians, though rarely in pure form and often in materially self-serving ways.

The famous martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps us understand what is at stake. In his book, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer describes the difference between the ultimate values of our faith and all those things that either contribute to the fulfillment of those values or stand in the way.

He puts it very directly:

“If... a human life is deprived of the conditions which are proper to it, then the justification of such a life by grace and faith, if it is not rendered impossible, is at least seriously impeded..... The hungry man needs bread and the homeless man needs a roof; the dispossessed need justice and the lonely need fellowship the undisciplined need order and the slave needs freedom. To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one’s neighbor.”²

We can see from this why plain old material and institutional arrangements are so very important. The way we arrange our world matters, and our politics is at the heart of this. Good laws and good programs help. Bad laws and oppressive institutions hurt. Inadequate programs don’t help very much. We cannot be complacent about how our world is *arranged*. God’s basic purposes for human life, as best we understand them, are at stake.

When a small child in the Sudan dies of disease or malnutrition, that is a quite physical event. How, then, can that child enter into the God-intended covenant on earth? How can all those suffering people in Burma be or become what God intends? Resolving the physical needs does not in itself draw people into a conscious relationship with God, for meeting their needs is only the *precondition*. Something more has to happen to enable one to enter into the spiritual realm of grace. But the life of the spirit needs to be in a physically supporting context.

Didn’t the epistle of James state this very point with delicious

²Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (tr. Neville Horton Smith, NY and London: Macmillan and SCM, 1955), pp. 134, 137.

sarcasm?

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘God in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:14-17. NRSV)

Similar things can be said about how political oppression, racism, and sexism impede the realization of covenant. Isn't God's intended covenant of love undermined by poverty and genocide, and war (with its violence, destruction, hatred, and suffering on a monumental scale)? On the other hand, a peaceful, just, prosperous, largely egalitarian society can contribute to the flowering of God's purposes for humanity.

But is it necessary to resort to politics to establish the basis and precondition of the covenant? Not always, of course. Out-and-out voluntary forms of charity and social action have always had a part to play.

Nevertheless, a second reason why the intersection between politics and Christianity is necessary lies in the nature of the state. Elsewhere I have defined the state as “society acting as a whole.”^{1/4} What?! Does society ever “act as a whole?” Can one conceive of any action of state that enjoys unanimous support? Probably not. But when the state acts, all of the necessary resources are drawn from the whole society, whether everybody likes it or not.

³*Christian Perspectives on Politics: Revised and Expanded* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2000)

In the current American political campaign, a group called “Move On” has made extraordinary use of the internet to draw vast numbers of people into opposition to the war in Iraq. No doubt, it has effectively diminished popular support for U. S. policy in Iraq. Nevertheless, in the process of raising and spending millions of dollars, Move On has provided taxable income for its employees and vendors. That taxable income has been taxed. *And*, a part of the tax revenue, paid by war opponents, has gone to help finance the war! In other words, by mounting its effort to oppose the war, Move On has engaged in an economic activity helping to support it! That would be true even of those who do not earn enough to pay taxes, so long as they participate to some extent in the economic exchanges of the society. Anything we do that helps in the normal functioning of society, contributes in other ways to sustaining the actions of state. There really is no escape. There is no island of purity in the sea of political wickedness—not even for sectarian Christians like the Hutterians—whom I greatly admire in other ways. Sad as it may seem, there is a deep sense in which, whatever the state is doing, we are all doing it together. So on that basis alone, the intersection of Christianity and politics is inescapable.

A third reason for this is at a different level. Following a useful distinction by Franz Neumann,⁴ we observe that political power is not the same thing as the direct power we may have over things or in our uses of technology. Joseph Nye’s book on *The Paradoxes of American Power* points to the difference between “Hard Power” and “Soft Power.” Hard power is raw force; soft power is the power of influence.

Haven’t we had a direct lesson on this in Iraq? In 2003 we went in with overwhelming “hard power.” We were going to “shock and awe” our adversaries. We thought we had. Last week was the fifth anniversary of President Bush’s declaration of victory: “Mission Accomplished.” Now, five years later, we are still mired in that awful

⁴See his *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State* (NY: Free Press, 1957), p. 3.

scene. Obviously, the United States simply has not been able to *influence* the minds of enough people.

We cannot just *make* people do what we want them to do. Political power is *influence* over the will of people. People have to *want* to do what we want them to do. Is that really so? Can we not think of people who have been *forced* to act in particular ways? It seems so, but being “forced” in that sense is being given powerful, usually negative, reasons for acting in the desired ways. Torture appears to be “force,” and yet some people are more capable than others of resisting torture. Jesus himself was not “forced” to do what the ruling establishment of the time wanted him to do; he was willing to die on the cross without betraying the gospel.

So what is political influence? People are influenced by their values, by what matters to them. Often that comes down to economic well-being. In the current American election economic anxieties are playing a huge role. That is often true in politics, but economics isn’t the only thing that shapes political attitudes. Even religion can do that, as we have seen. Nicolo Machiavelli makes the shrewd observation that to gain and keep power the Prince must, above all, *appear* to be religious—even though he must also be prepared to set religion aside when needful.⁵ Machiavelli put it this way:

“A Prince should therefore be very careful... that to see and hear him, one would think him the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion. And there is no virtue which is more necessary for him to seem to possess than this last [religion]; because men in general judge rather by the eye than by the hand, for every one can see but few can touch. Every one sees what you seem, but few know what you are, and these few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the

⁵Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (NY: P. F. Collier, 1938 [1513]), p. 58.

many who have the majesty of the State to back them up.”⁶

What does this cynical judgment mean? It means that many people highly prize the values of religion, and religion has great influence over their political will.

How does this assessment of political power relate to the state as society acting as a whole? In large measure, it means that people value their society and state even more than their opposition to any of the state’s particular policies.

But if values, including religious values, play so large a role in politics, Christians had better pay close attention to what is happening to their values in the public arena. More especially, they had better attend to the political dangers posed by values that are antithetical to Christian faith.

It remains that the intersection between Christianity and politics is inescapable, at least for these three basic reasons.

Christian Life at the Intersection

How, then, can Christians live, as Christians, at that troubled intersection between faith and politics? Again, I suggest three points, each of which is obviously based upon a particular interpretation, as well as application, of the faith we hold.

First, to be Christian is to have respect for others, including

⁶Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (NY: P.F. Collier, 1938 [1513]), 36:58.

those who are not Christian. Most people in the contemporary world, in fact, are not. We should be very slow to use the power of state to silence those who disagree with us about issues of faith.

We bear in mind that we are limited human beings, we are not God. Only God knows it all; the rest of us only “see in a mirror, dimly.” When we use the power of state to silence others we should bear in mind that God may also be speaking through them! Of course, others can also be wrong, just as we can be wrong. But to respect all of God’s children is to be open to civil dialogue. I must confess that I yearn for a time when the politics of my land will become more civil. This country is deeply divided as it approaches yet another crucial election. That, in itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. But when divisions are infected by disrespect and fueled by self-righteous religion, the end result is hugely destructive of civil community. Would that our public discourse could be more framed by Paul’s 13th Chapter of First Corinthians!

Second, to be Christian is to keep one’s political focus on what is really happening to people. That is far more important than the ideological passions so often expressed in public life. For instance, more important than either socialism or capitalism, as such, is the question whether people are being fed, clothed, sheltered, and accorded adequate medical care. In similar vein, political partisanship should be subordinate to human well-being. Ideologies and parties are useful ways of organizing our thinking and action toward the end of human good, but for Christians they cannot become ends in themselves.

Third, we should be using our politics to foster hope among the poor, alienated, and stigmatized people in the world. I respond with great enthusiasm to a simple, but far-reaching proposal advanced jointly by former U. S. Senators George McGovern and Robert Dole. Any proposal supported alike by these very different political leaders can be taken seriously! The proposal is that the wealthier nations should band together to ensure that every child on earth should have access to a nutritious school lunch. Besides the obvious benefits for the children’s health, this would help ensure

school attendance everywhere! And, in accordance with the proposal that countries could receive this aid only if girls were included, the effect would dramatically increase gender equality in many countries. What a sign of hope such a program would be in the most impoverished parts of the world. But would it cost too much? I was astonished to learn that the net cost annually would be considerably less than US\$10 billion. The concept has been endorsed by the United Nations and a number of countries, including the United States—although the U.S. has so far advanced only between \$100 and 300 million in a handful of pilot project countries. Serious funding of this kind of program could do a whole lot more good than hundreds of billions poured into military adventures!

Also, I think of using politics to advance the hopes of people who have been alienated and stigmatized in our societies. For instance, I could wish that the debates raging within and beyond the American churches over homosexuality—including the questions of monogamous unions or marriages—would pay more attention to the people affected. Based upon abundant pastoral experience with gay and lesbian people, I have to observe that many live quite normal, morally disciplined, and spiritually mature lives. That should affect our politics more than preconceptions or political demagoguery on that explosive subject.

The Importance of Character in Politics

Often Christians, especially those in my country, will conclude that it all comes down to the moral character of political leaders. We should be careful to entrust political power to persons of good character, especially good Christian character. That is an old theme in American politics. In the early days of American democratic experience, it was the practice in a number of Protestant pulpits for the clergy to preach an “election sermon” just prior to a time of election. These were not characteristically designed to support particular candidates so much as to highlight the qualities to be sought in public officials. One such sermon, preached during the late colonial period in New England by Charles Chauncy, expounded

the theme:

“... civil rulers should have upon their minds a becoming sense of God and religion: And it should govern their public conduct. Whatever they do, in their several stations, should be done under the guidance of an habitual awe of God, a serious regard to his governing will, and their accountableness to him.... In one word, they will now be the subjects of that divine and universal principle of good conduct, which may, under God, be depended on, to carry them thro’ the whole of their duty, upon all occasions, under all difficultiers, and in opposition to all temptations, to the rendring the people, over whom they bear rule, as happy as ‘tis in their power to make them. To be sure, without a principle of religion, none of their services for the public will meet with the divine approbation.”⁶

While emphasizing the importance of Christian character, Chauncy was quite cognizant of the importance of the actual purposes of the Christian politician. In our time, there are those who focus so much on character itself that they overlook the possibility that good people can do bad things, and that bad people can do good things.

⁷Charles Chauncy, “Civil Magistrates Must Be Just, Ruling In The Fear of God,” in Ellis Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 166-167.

I recall one Southern U.S. Senator who appeared to be (and probably was) the very soul of rectitude in his personal behavior, with no scandal ever touching him. He even taught Sunday School when possible. And yet, for all of his evident moral character, this Senator resolutely defended racial segregation, which entailed the systematic degradation and brutalization of millions of people solely on account of the color of their skin—a great and scandalous evil. At the same time, I can recall a politician I knew in the State of California whose personal character was not above reproach, but whose public support for human rights was courageous and whose leadership in advancing public health was visionary and creative. Which of these two politicians exhibited moral character? Neither was flawless, of course, and I'm sure the angels dance with joy when personal virtue and public vision coincide. But if required to choose, would one not prefer the latter to the former? And would one not say that courage and vision in the pursuit of social justice are themselves aspects of *personal* character? So a faith-directed conscience must also be clear-headed about the issues

What about such a faith in the present, very important, election year?

In some respects, the relationship between religious faith and politics is just getting started—even though this campaign has been going on for a very long time. Much has been said about religious faith in the lives of the leading candidates; not as much has been said about how this has informed their perspective on the issues facing the nation and the world. I have a hunch that the party nominees will not have much to say about those deeply divisive cultural issues. I have an impression that the “religious right” will not have as much influence in this election as it has had in the last two. In that respect, this may be a more civil time of national decision-making. At least we can hope so.

But there is one deep, thematic divide that may have been illustrated by the Jeremiah Wright episode. I hasten to say that I have not read his sermons, preached through the years, and I hear good things about his Chicago church. His angry rhetoric, illustrated

in the sermon quotes we saw on television—and, even more, his words at the National Press Club were condemned by some and applauded by others. Those who applauded his sudden rise to national prominence spoke of him as a much-needed prophetic voice. Others criticized him as unpatriotic.

Was he prophetic? Perhaps so, in the tradition of an Amos exposing the injustice of national history and practice that many would overlook. Was he unpatriotic? His defenders aptly responded that the best forms of patriotism include criticism of one's nation. But I think we need to push this to a deeper level. There are two forms of being prophetic: One was illustrated by Rev. Wright's widely-publicized rhetoric. The other by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rev. Wright concentrated on the nation's sins, inviting a sense of guilt in some and feelings of victimhood among others. The sins and guilt are real, and vast numbers of people have been victims—and these legacies of guilt and victimhood continue to cast a long shadow upon our nation's life.

Dr. King, no less conscious of guilt and victimhood, appealed to grace and the beloved community. His deep insight was that the guilty are also victims; in some ways more deeply injured spiritually than those whom they have oppressed. The beloved community has to be built on love, not on heightened divisions between oppressors and their victims. That is not a sentimental kind of love; it is love taking the form of justice, and justice grounded in love. It is the mature, courageous love embodied in the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the Truth and Justice Commission in South Africa—seeking to overcome those legacies of oppression with a reconciled community in which all can be a part.

That is, of course, the fundamental institutional purpose of the church, as harbinger of God's intended human family. And it is also a secular possibility among the people of a great nation. That is religion in politics at its very best. I believe we can reach for this in a pivotal national election year. I believe each of the major candidates

is personally capable of that. Whether they rise to that level will depend in part upon the broader debate among the people of the nation and how particular issues are addressed.

What of the specific issues facing us that will be particularly formative?

What are those issues? Others may assess the political landscape differently, but I ask you tonight to ponder these:

- The long half century of “Cold War” is over. Thank God for that! But in the post-Cold War world we must face anew the question that far-sighted leaders confronted at the end of World War II. What would the shape of the “New World Order” come to be? That generation developed the United Nations organization as a great venture in collective security and global solidarity. The UN has recorded enormous accomplishments since then, many of them in giving form to international dialogue and in finding solutions to collective problems, such as global health, communications, transportation safety, and environmental conservation. Despite accomplishments, the original vision of collective security proved elusive, especially because of the military stalemate between the U. S. and the Soviet Union. Now there may be fresh opportunities to address that issue. If I may address the particular responsibilities of my own country, the United States is presently the world’s remaining “super power.” But will the United States have the vision to help forge new patterns of collective security. Will it act so as to foster greater confidence in its intentions and leadership or to further squander the reservoir of good will that surrounded this nation following 9/11? The spiritual consequences of this are enormous: Can God’s intended global community be drawn closer by ties of mutual affection, or will humanity be an increasingly dysfunctional family?
- A particular piece of that question is whether the seemingly intractable animosities in places like the Balkans and the Middle East can be healed through the right kinds of international

presence. There have been both encouraging and discouraging illustrations in recent years. Currently the situation is largely discouraging. Perhaps the forthcoming change in U. S. leadership can make a difference. I can hope so. In any event there clearly need to be some changes in policy.

- What shape will be given to the burgeoning new realities of international trade? Further increases in trade are both inevitable and desirable. Inevitable? Desirable? Yes, I believe so. The momentum toward increases in trade now seem inexorable. Protests, such as we have seen when major World Bank and IMF meetings are held, will not stop them. Why not? Increases in trade clearly profit the major corporations. More than that, they are in the interest of the major national economies of North America, Europe, Japan, China and India. But, if increased world trade is inevitable is it also desirable. I believe that, too. But to understand that we must refer to one of the fundamentals of economic theory: the principle of comparative advantage. In brief, that principle holds that in a system of economic exchange (even in a socialist economy) every participant has some goods or services to exchange which are more to their advantage than to others. A U.S. president may also be a superb typist—better than anybody in the office pool. But the president should spend his/her time on the business of state, which he or she can do much better than anybody in the support staff. That is the president's "comparative advantage." It is therefore in the "comparative advantage" of the staff to do the typing. They can't do it better than the president, but it is in everybody's advantage for them to do it.

Think of that in terms of national economies. A Bangladesh hasn't much in the way of exportable raw materials, and not much of an industrial base either. So what does Bangladesh have to offer in trade for the goods and services it needs to break out of the rawest forms of poverty? It would appear that the answer is cheap labor, the product of which you will notice every time you spot a "Made in Bangladesh" label in an article of clothing. In similar vein, you can think of the principle of

comparative advantage every time you have a telecommunications conversation with somebody from India, speaking in behalf of a U. S. company. The Indian may be well-educated, but it profits the U. S. company to farm out the labor because it is *relatively* cheaper. Then, does the use of such cheap labor amount to immoral exploitation? It may come down to *how* cheap. The alternative for the Bangladeshes of the world is continued profound poverty. Being drawn into the productive work of 1st world companies, creating things for the 1st world market, at least gets things going for countries that otherwise have *nothing* going for them.

The political issue is whether regulatory mechanisms on a global scale can keep wages at a level consistent with basic health, while at the same time making provision for workers in the 1st world settings who may have been deprived of jobs. The goal may be clear; the means of accomplishing it less so. International bodies like the World Trade Organization potentially can gain traction on the problem, although their record so far is spotty. In any event, the comparative advantage of cheap labor cannot be abandoned altogether without consigning hundreds of millions of people to abject poverty. The thematic problems presented by increased world trade must be addressed by political means.

- An issue that is obviously pressing upon us today is whether political will can be summoned to deal effectively and quickly with the scandal represented by some 40 million people who lack health insurance, a condition incalculably diminishing the well-being of vast numbers of men, women, and children? American politics is far too captive to major pharmaceutical and insurance companies. We came fairly close to resolving the problem, largely along Canadian and German lines, in 1994, but the effort fell short, largely because of concerted, demagogic campaigning against it.
- Will we address the explosive cultural issues—such as gay marriage and abortion—with a deeply compassionate regard for

the people affected, or will we allow these issues to fester in an atmosphere poisoned by self-righteousness? This is a point at which churches could exert major influence if they were not so divided internally themselves. Dealing with the major cultural issues is rendered all the more difficult by the continuing force of fundamentalist fanaticism—a reality all over the world, present to some extent in all the world's religions. Which brings us full circle to the importance of religion in politics. Dealing with the cultural issues requires greater attention to the issues of faith that give rise to fanaticism. It seems evident to me that religious insecurity is the seed-bed of fanaticism. That is ironic because fanaticism so often present the appearance of securely held certainties.

Perhaps, as I have listed these issues, other equally urgent concerns may have come to mind? I hope so, for each of us has a unique perspective.

In the preface to his great novel, *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo had this to say:

“So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, a social damnation artificially creating hells in the midst of civilization, and complicating the destiny which is divine with a fatality which is human; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man through poverty, the ruin of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through ignorance—are not solved; so long as in certain regions social asphyxia [suffocation] is possible,—in other words, and from a still wider point of view, so long as ignorance and wretchedness exist on the earth, books like this cannot be useless.”

Beyond the attractions of partisanship, deeper than the seductions of self-interest and self-righteousness, we are called to see the great issues of our time in the light of our faith. And echoing the words of the French novelist, so long as the vast problems of our age persist, our lives, well-lived, cannot be useless.