

Faith & Politics

By David E. Price

The Bible harshly admonishes leaders who declare "Mission Accomplished" prematurely. The relevant passage is Jeremiah's condemnation of prophets and priests who "deal falsely": "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace." Or, as a contemporary translation has it: "They act as if my people's wounds were only scratches. 'All is well,' they say, when all is not well," (Jeremiah 6:14).

What a text for our times! I had occasion to recall this and to remind others of it during the 2004 campaign. How the admonition resonates when we think not only of President Bush, dressed in a flight suit declaring victory in Iraq, but also of his complacency in the face of economic distress, pulling the plug on extended unemployment benefits in 2003. Bush's hope seemed to be that no one would notice that the jobs were not coming back and thousands were still exhausting their benefits every week. "All is well," he said, in effect, when all was manifestly not well.

I made this point in different campaign contexts, sometimes framing it with the scriptural reference, sometimes not. My audiences always understood the message and were receptive to it. Yet I was struck by how much more engaged and enthused they were when I first reminded them of the familiar phrase, "'Peace, peace' when there is no peace."

Although I did not set out to conduct an experiment, my experience demonstrates how speaking in the religious idiom connects with many audiences, relating contemporary reality to truths and stories that are part of their personal history. Such references should be accessible and inclusive; they must fit the situation and not be contrived or strained. But political discourse that shows an easy familiarity with our faith traditions and draws on religious teachings has a unique power to instruct and inspire.

I have participated in numerous post-election discussions of how our values and aspirations as Democrats can be shown to relate to our own convictions as people of faith, and to those of the voters. Making this connection is not solely a matter of the terminology we use or the analogies we draw. We must explore and share the wellsprings of our political commitments and ask how our deepest values should shape public policy.

I have some sense of irony as I hear Democrats being urged to be more forthright in relating faith to politics. My own religious convictions and the broadening they underwent in the context of the civil rights movement had a great deal to do with my becoming a Democrat in the 1960s. Civil rights protests in North Carolina also gave me my first serious interfaith experience; like many others before and since, I discovered that one could bring one's deepest convictions to political advocacy and at the same time make common cause with people whose theological and



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philosophical perspectives differed greatly -- and sometimes did not have conventional religious roots at all.

This is not to say that translating religious and moral convictions into social action is always simple or straightforward. Prior to World War II, for example, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr challenged those who interpreted the Christian ethic of love to counsel non-resistance and pacifism. Such a view, he said, owed more to Enlightenment notions of human perfectibility than to biblical faith. In taking full account of human sin and the will to power, Niebuhr argued, "Christian realism" recognized "that justice [could] be achieved only by a certain degree of coercion on the one hand, and by resistance to coercion and tyranny on the other hand."

Such matters deserve searching, respectful exploration within and among religious communities. It is erroneous to assume that a committed Christian or Jew will have a fixed or formulaic view on capital punishment, abortion, same-sex relationships, the alleviation of poverty, war and peace, and many other issues. The insularity of our religious communities -- and, often, of the political circles we move in -- discourages dialogue and debate. And no doubt there is a human tendency to limit the agenda of issues to which we apply religious principles, giving short shrift to those which we find unsettling. It was difficult for the white church in the 1960s to move beyond an individualistic understanding of faith to appreciate its prophetic and social dimensions. Today's challenges often seem murkier, resistant to tidy prescriptions, but it is no less important to discern and discuss the implications of faith for them.

Political leaders should attend to and participate in such discussions, though we may seldom be in a position to lead them. Agreement will not come easily, nor should we expect perfect agreement. Not all religious communities, for example, approach or understand Scripture in the same way. Most of us understand, at least in theory, the pitfalls of selective interpretation. We must guard against picking only those teachings that we find convenient or useful. But some selective application is inevitable, whether it be of the codes of Leviticus or the counsels of perfection of the Sermon on the Mount.

What guides such judgments? How do we understand the admonitions throughout the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament that we should attend less to the minutiae of the law than to the broader obligation to "do justice and to love kindness" and to love God and our neighbor? Relating faith and politics is not merely a matter of referencing scriptural commands. It requires ongoing efforts to mine the riches of our faith traditions and to apply them to new and challenging circumstances. This might range from subjecting military interventions to "just war" criteria to evaluating presidential budget requests as statements of moral priorities.

We will also debate when and how to attempt to translate religious and moral precepts into civil law. Few would now argue that religion should be relegated to a solely personal and private sphere, or that the separation of church and state requires such a "privatization" of faith. As the author Jim Wallis asks, "Where would America be if the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had kept his faith to himself?"

Religious faith is a critical source of political motivation, and religious convictions shape our advocacy. But as people of faith enter the political arena, we will necessarily seek understanding

and agreement across communal lines. We will invoke commonly held values and the shared aspirations of the wider community. Rather than viewing our religious convictions as a debate-stopper, we must follow Isaiah's injunction: "Come now, let us reason together."

There may be situations where religiously-based disapproval of certain behaviors (for example, same-gender sexual relations) comes into conflict with shared democratic values such as civil liberty and nondiscrimination, which themselves have a strong religious pedigree. Sometimes, religiously grounded precepts may not find broader agreement. In such instances, the best course may be to stop short of codifying specific religious and moral precepts into civil law, leaving the individual and communal expression of conscience free.

Religious conservatives often bridle at counsels of restraint, complaining of being asked, as my colleague Rep. Mark Souder (R-Ind.) puts it, "to check my Christian beliefs at the public door." There is also a tendency to belittle the search for common ground as leading to a mere "common denominator" that lacks specificity or force. That, I believe, greatly underestimates the power of the fundamental principles of our constitutional democracy, which have deep religious roots but also find broader resonance. Certainly it would have come as news to Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King as they invoked the Declaration of Independence to combat slavery and segregation, that making a universalistic appeal diluted their passion or the force of their argument.

We also need to understand two critical facts about the U.S. Constitution's prohibition of the "establishment" of religion. As noted, it does not require the "privatization" of faith. And secondly, its defense is not only that religious coercion must be avoided but that religious liberty must be protected. The First Amendment, in other words, protects not only civil liberty but also religious faithfulness. The most powerful argument against the tendency of some conservatives to transgress constitutional boundaries is in fact a religious one, as became clear when the "Religious Freedom Amendment" to the Constitution, heir to the earlier school-prayer amendments, was defeated in the House in 1998.

Finally, our religious traditions teach us humility, and that, too, should influence our politics. This is the point of the familiar story of Abraham Lincoln's response during the Civil War to a clergyman who expressed the hope that the Lord was on the side of the Union. "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right," Lincoln said. "But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

When Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and John Edwards (D-N.C.) cited that story during the 2004 campaign, I found voters taking note and appreciating the insight. After all, like Lincoln's masterful second inaugural address, it draws on the fundamental religious understanding that our own will and striving are always subject to God's judgment. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "We must not regard any human institution or object as being an end in itself. Man's achievements in this world are but attempts, and a temple that comes to mean more than a reminder of the living God is an abomination."

Integral to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the realization that people are inclined to a kind of idolatry whereby they identify their own interest or ideology with God's sovereign will. Like

"God-fearing" people of all ages, Niebuhr wrote, we "are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire." Note that, once again, the most powerful argument against religious pretension is not secular but theological. Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.

So let us engage: our country needs the full-throated advocacy of "liberty and justice for all" -- of policies that realize opportunity, responsibility, and community -- that only Democrats and progressives are likely to make. We can engage far more effectively by taking explicit account of the faith traditions which provide most Americans with their personal and moral frames of reference. This is partly a matter of communicating effectively, but also of understanding more fully what is required of us and our society as heirs to these riches. A more deeply rooted politics will enable us to make a more authentic and persuasive case for a just society, even as it equips us to resist political arrogance and pretension and to defend the American constitutional order.

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