

Religion and Politics

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The rule of law functions through punitive power.

The state governs through force and the threat of force. With laws come penalties if one breaks the law. State and national governments have the power to take away a person's property, liberty or life if the laws are broken. When we think about the role of religion in shaping public policy, we are thinking about what is the appropriate part religion ought to play in the formation and in the exercise of coercive power.

This becomes especially important in a secular society whose laws are supposedly based on a separation of church and state. This becomes especially important in an historical moment when conservative politics has married conservative Christianity to make a partnership willing to use the electoral process to enforce certain religious beliefs upon the society at large. The question is important in a society becoming less and less tied to one religious tradition. This question is important at a time when the nation is nervously fighting a "war against terror."

This moment is not the first or only time that religious people in the United States have worked to shape public policy in the image of their own religious convictions. One of the most important of these moments came in the second half of the twentieth century when African-Americans in the United States, led mostly by men and women of deep religious conviction, protested the second-class citizenship of African-Americans. They sought to overturn legal statutes and precedents that inscribed injustice and inequality into the jurisprudence of the United States.

However, neither the Civil Rights Movement nor the political activity of the religious right are historically singular and disconnected from other political, historical and religious movements. Each has a religious and ideological genealogy that reaches back to the earliest days of American history and beyond. The Civil Rights Movement descends from the progressive left of the early twentieth century, from the labor movement, from social gospel theology of the early twentieth century, from post millennialism, from the abolitionist and feminist movements of the 19th century from the slave rebellions of the 19th century, from Quaker and Baptist convictions about equality under the law, from Christian pacifism, and the call to righteousness and justice from the Hebrew prophets. The religious right finds its parentage in anti-communist, pro-capitalist, laissez-faire economics, American patriotism, dispensationalist premillennialism, the Great Awakening, puritanism, the Mayflower compact, and perfectionism.

Both ideological branches of the American family, both the progressive and the conservative, grow from basic classical liberalism of the Enlightenment. Classical liberalism embodied in the thought of John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and others, sought to put limits on the power of the state while ensuring liberty and equality for the citizens of the state. Classical liberalism understands the state's responsibilities to the poor. Both progressives and conservatives have a paradoxical relationship to the question of state involvement in the lives

of individuals. Conservatives tend to want to keep the state at a distance when it comes to taxes, the regulation of business, gun laws, and social welfare programs. However, they want the state to spend money on weapons systems. Conservatives tend to want to pass laws regulating personal choices such as abortion and homosexual relationships. (An anti-abortion stance is argued as a protection of unborn life, but such a position does not consider the right of a woman to decide what happens inside her body.)

On the other hand, progressives tend to want the government to use tax money for programs that will benefit the poor, and to spend money on public works and education. They favor regulation of industry and labor rights. At the same time, they expect government to keep its distance from privacy issues such as abortion and homosexuality. (Progressives usually favor equal rights under the law for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people.) Religious conservatives want to see the public schools teach creationism or its most recent iteration, intelligent design, as science while progressives want a multi-cultural curriculum that includes the history and culture of racial and ethnic minorities and that includes positive images of self-proclaimed homosexual people living ordinary lives. Conservatives see such texts as the state putting its imprimatur on what they consider a sinful lifestyle choice.

Since religious convictions walk hand in hand with political ideology, how do we know when religion is misusing politics and when politics is misusing religion? In my opinion, religion interacts rightly with politics when it recognizes and respects the particular role that each plays in society. Catholic moral theology understands the separate responsibilities of different aspects of the social, economic, and political order through the principle of subsidiary function. The idea is that there are certain things the state can do that the church cannot. For example: the state can build roads and highways, establish an army and police forces while the church cannot. The church can provide a space for religious ritual, community building and moral instruction in ways that the state cannot. In a secular society when religion clearly understands and respects church/state boundaries and only asks the state to perform its particular function well, then religion is acting appropriately in its relationship with the state.

The preamble to the Constitution of the United States articulates its reason for being and the purpose of this particular nation.

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

When religion encourages the state to be more just, it is in right relationship with the state; when it encourages the state to reduce violence inside and outside of its national borders, when it encourages the state to look to the well being of its people, when it encourages the state to allow liberty for its citizens, especially those who are part of a minority, then religion is in right relation with the state.

Religion is able to take this stance in relation to the state because the rule of law is not the only form of governance in any society. Governance exists to regulate individual and societal behavior. Religion is a form of governance. It is a governance of belief, of faith, of love, of grace. Its power does not come through a threat of punishment so much as from the promise of blessing. For example: if a religious community thinks that abortion is wrong, it should teach and preach against it. Better yet, the community ought to establish adopt a family ministries designed to care for and walk with a woman and her children for the 20 and more years it takes to rear a child into adulthood. It ought to surround families in trouble with a caring community.

It is the role of the state to see to it that all its citizens have equal access to quality health care, including abortion. This is a justice issue. History has already shown us what happens when abortions are illegal. Rich women go to a country where abortions are safe and legal; women of lesser means seek illegal abortions or try to self abort and thus risk their own lives. Religion teaches that the unborn child is a life worthy of communal protection; the state has a primary obligation to protect the life and legal rights of the woman who carries the child. When religion seeks to use the coercive power of the state to restrict a woman's choices regarding her health, it is seeking to use government to enforce a religious belief.

This willingness of some religious leaders to use the coercive power of the state in personal matters showed itself during the early days of the AIDS crisis. William Martin, in his book *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*,¹ reports that when Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, an opponent of abortion who had enjoyed the support of the religious right, began to advocate sex education and the use of condoms to stop the spread of HIV-AIDS, he found himself under attack by some of the people who had supported him. In a speech before the National Religious Broadcasters Koop said: "Initially you sought freedom. In the process you gained power. And with power, a small minority want control" (253). Religion errs in its relationship with the state when it seeks to control a population and to achieve religious ends by using the coercive power of the state.

Another inappropriate way that religion and politics interact is when religious leaders use theological sanctions to coerce their congregants into supporting a particular candidate or position. Within the context of Christianity, the idea that one's salvation is tied to one's vote is, in my opinion, a sacrilege. Such nullifies the salvific efficacy of the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Catholic bishops threaten to deny the Eucharist to politicians and congregants for their position in favor of a woman's right to choose an abortion even if they also

¹ William Martin. *With God on Our Side: the Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996)

hold that such is a tragic choice, they are using the Eucharist as a political weapon. This is inappropriate.

In many ways, religion has a much greater power than the power of the state. I started this essay with the observation that the rule of law functions through punitive power. There, however, is another rule, the rule of love which functions through the power to bless. It functions through the power to bring happiness, through the power to connect human beings with each other in ways that foster mutual respect and peace. It is a power without national borders, without the need for courts of law, for prisons, or for death chambers. It is a power that is not bound by time or space or custom. Religion ought not forfeit this power in a thirst for the power to control through force.