

Religion at the Ballot Box

TEXT:
Psalm 72:1-7
Isaiah 61:1
Zechariah 8:16
I Peter 2:16-17

January 27, 2008

In less than a year, a new President will begin service to our nation. As we sort our way through the current cast of candidates we cannot help but notice the ever present topic of religion and religious faith on the campaign trail. This heightened attention on the spiritual connection with electoral politics prompted one commentator to note: “Never before have we heard so much about religion on the campaign trail.” Opps, I’m sorry, that was a quote from my files on the presidential campaign of 2000. What prompted that observation eight years ago was the inclusion into the race of someone who was outspoken about his personal religious beliefs. That person was, of course, Senator Joe Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew who was the Democratic nominee for Vice President. Sometimes we forget that religion is never too far from the ballot box.

As our current presidential campaign hits its full stride next week with the eyes of the nation turned toward the Kansas caucuses (with a few other states mixed in), it seems timely to explore the question of the place of religion in American politics.

This year the candidates for the highest office in the land include a Southern Baptist minister who called his victory in Iowa a sign of God’s hand in his campaign. The field includes an African-American who is a member of the largest United Church of

Christ congregation in America, and yet someone who was recently called upon to refute a rumor that he is actually a Muslim who secretly took his oath of office using a Koran rather than a Bible. We also find in this race, a life-long United Methodist woman, a former Roman Catholic altar boy; an Episcopalian who worships in a large conservative Baptist church; and a candidate who, in the tradition of the greatest Republican of them all, Abraham Lincoln, states a belief in Christian faith, but has not been a member of a congregation for many years. And then there is the candidate who has sparked considerable interest regarding religion, former Governor, Mitt Romney.

It is an address on religion and his own personal faith presented by Gov. Romney in early December that prompted this sermon. Mr. Romney has deep family roots in the Mormon tradition. Because Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalist and Baptists are part of the mainstream of American culture, the other candidates are not asked whether the leadership of their religious traditions might dictate policy during their presidency. Mr. Romney is not so fortunate. He comes from a non-traditional religion which is not well understood by most Americans. Facing strong opposition from Evangelicals within the Republican Party, who generally see Mormonism as something other than a Christian denomination, Mr.

Romney sought to set the record straight on his views of religious freedom in America.

For the most part, he gave a thoughtful and well-received address. He offered an informed understanding of the religious heritage of the nation. He said, “We do not insist on a single strain of religion – rather we welcome our nation’s symphony of faith.”ⁱ This vision of religion in America has been with us since the beginning. In his book, *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham cites James Madison as saying that the laws protecting freedom of religion were formed to protect Jews and Gentiles, “Christians and Mahomatans, [sic] the Hindoo [sic] and infidel of every denomination.”ⁱⁱ This same sentiment was voiced by George Washington who, shortly after he was inaugurated as President, wrote a letter to a Jewish congregation affirming the place of religious tolerance in the newly formed United States of America. He wrote, *The Government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution not assistance.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Indeed, the rise of religious freedom in our country has been a remarkable symbol of our moral strength to other nations. As Diana Eck, professor of Religion at Harvard, points out in her book, *The New Religious America*, America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world.^{iv} Today, there are more Muslims in American than there are Episcopalians or Presbyterians. In part, it is this

innovation of the American Constitution, freedom of religion, which has allowed such a remarkable religious culture to flourish. People in this nation are assured the freedom to worship as they please without fear of rebuke, persecution or disdain from an establishment religion.

And yet, in our current circumstances, we find a great temptation among many voters and the politicians who cater to them, to narrowly define acceptable religious belief. As a result, we struggle as a nation to understand how we might effectively be governed as a religiously diverse nation. You may recall the uproar in some parts of our country in 2006 when Keith Ellison was the first Muslim elected to congress.

This struggle, this uncertainty about non-traditional religious affiliation formed the background for the speech by Gov. Romney, as it did John Kennedy in 1960.

As we consider the place of non-traditional religions leadership, keep in mind the texts that we have been reading from Isaiah over the last two weeks, it is King Cyrus, the leader of a former enemy, the Persians, who acted on behalf of the Israelites, preserving the Jewish nation and saving their tradition and faith. God used an outsider, a Gentile, to carry on God's salvation history.

In his speech, Governor Romney argued correctly that religion has a role to play in informing the decisions of a President. Most Americans would find that acceptable. Religious faith has much to offer to the political discourse. With its honest

reflection on the persistence of sin in human life, evidenced in the preponderance of self-interest and self-righteousness in public society, Christianity offers an honest and real perspective on human character. As Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most important political thinkers in the first half of the 20th century, pointed out, America has a great capacity to fight evil, but we must never overlook our own susceptibility to that same temptation toward evil. One only needs to raise the tragic specter of Abu Ghraib to confirm this duality.^v

Our readings this morning speak to our activities, our behavior, our engagement in the world around us. Each text speaks of taking action on behalf of others, to alleviate suffering, to be fair in our judgment and to rebuild the lives of the oppressed. These scriptures confirm a call to faithfulness in our economic, social and political lives. Christians have for generations debated and disagreed about how we live our lives in the political context, but we have always understood that we are to follow the example of Jesus, to bring good news to the oppressed. [Isaiah 61:1, see also Luke 4:16-20]

Christian insight into human nature asks essential questions about our common humanity and about our lust for power, control, greed and retaliation; it compels us to consider the common good. The words of the Holy One spoken through the prophet Zechariah offer a simple enough direction for our political lives: *These are the things I that you should do: Speak the truth to one another, render judgments that are true and make for peace.* [Zechariah 8:16]

The perspective that God brings to our public policy draws our attention to the people our conventional politics most often neglects, the poor, the vulnerable, the outsider, while at the same time, reminds us of the larger world around us and the perspective and creativity brought by the diversity in our nation. Significantly, we see a common agreement on these principles among conservative and progressive Christians alike.

If we are honest, we would admit that Christians on the right and left draw inspiration from the same book of scripture. Conservative Christians find insight in the Bible to support their position opposing stem cell research and same-sex marriages. Liberal Christians, meanwhile, find a basis in the scripture to oppose apartheid in South Africa, the death penalty and war in most of its forms. On this point the wisdom of retired Episcopal Bishop John Spong seems appropriate: "Since God is quoted by both sides, the only sure bet is God will win."^{vi}

Where that line regarding the religious influences of a President gets blurred is when that religion becomes less general and more particular and sectarian. Here is the point at which an appropriate criticism of Gov. Romney's speech can be made. He stated, plainly, that there should be no litmus test for any person running for the office of President. And yet, immediately he offered such a test, aligning his own belief with the views of the evangelical wing of the Republican Party. He made the case, appropriately, for the freedom of religion in America, and then seemingly undercut it by associating his beliefs with a particular point-of-

view in order to secure votes in the upcoming primaries.

Charles Krauthammer, the conservative columnist for *The Washington Post*, wrote a column about Gov. Romney's speech. In it, he noted that there are two arguments that are in play in this debate about the role of religion in electoral politics. The first defends the right of religion in the public square as appropriate and necessary, that is, that religion has a place in the political discourse. The other, which is far more dangerous in Krauthammer's view, proclaims the privileged status of religion in political experience,^{vii} that is, that one religion or interpretation of religion becomes paramount in the nation's political life. To put it a different way, non-theistic belief or alien religious belief are less valued and less valuable within the political debate.

Can there be a candidate who perfectly embodies the values of Christian faith? No. Is there a political party that is better placed to bring about God's will in the public square? No. God has no preference between the Republican or Democratic party. The Holy One has an agenda far beyond the limited horizon of any political platform or affiliation.

At the same time, however, we are called as a Christian people to take seriously our political responsibilities. It is essential that we take our understanding of the nature and character of God, our reading of the scripture, our serious theological reflections as a Christian man or woman, into the ballot booth and with good conscience and clear faith cast our vote.

Abraham Lincoln had it right: In his second inaugural address, he said,

Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessings and endorsement for all our national policies and practices –saying in effect, God is on our side, rather, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God's side.^{viii}

I did not offer a prayer at the beginning of this sermon as is my custom. But I wish to conclude with one now. This prayer is taken from our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*. May its words feed our soul as we discern God's will for our personal vote.

Under your law we live, great God, and by your will we govern ourselves. Help us as good citizens to respect neighbors whose views differ from ours, so that without partisan anger, we may work out issues that divide us, and elect candidates to serve the common welfare; through Jesus Christ the Lord.

ⁱ Jon Meacham, "A New American Holy War." *Newsweek*, December 17, 2008

ⁱⁱ Quoted in David Brooks, "Faith vs. the Faithless," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ George Washington, "Reply to the Hebrew Congregation, Newport, Rhode Island, 17 August, 1791." At [gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents, Hebrews/reply](http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/Hebrews/reply)

^{iv} Diana Eck, *The New Religious America How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, (Harper/San Francisco, 199).

^v Benedicta Cipolla, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, c. 2007; reprinted in "Reinhold Niebuhr is unseen force in 2008 election," *Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 5, 2007.

^{vi} John Spong, *Beliefnet.com* May 18, 2006

^{vii} Charles Krauthammer, "An Overdose of Public Piety," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2008

^{viii} Ronald White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, (Simon and Schuster, 2002)

**This sermon delivered by
Kent Winters-Hazelton
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS 66047**