

Public Faith in a Pluralistic World

An Election Year Meditation

- I see faith as relevant to all of life—through the incarnation, the divine came through to the human. Need to get beyond the sacred-secular divide.
- There are diverse approaches to this, each with its strengths and its shadow side.
 - Inner mystical/transformational—good aspects: charismatic renewal, interior transformation, contemplation, meditation; cautions for potential shadow side: narcissistic, self absorbed, can feed ego, “I’m more spiritual than others.”
 - Outer/social justice—good aspects: civil rights, peace, environmental movements, political elections; cautions for potential shadow side: too ego driven/pride, “We are right; you are wrong and wrongly motivated,” resentment, burn out.
 - Need inner and outer balance. Both ways. “Lord you are God and I am not.”
- Perspective developed in Heart to Heart work which is open to all.
 - **Have faith convictions**, be in touch with and share your religious perspective, especially in *telling your story*. Advocacy or evangelism can be a good thing. Caution for the shadow side—rigidity, self-righteousness/pride, hostility toward persons who think differently than you, unable to learn from others or to evolve.
 - **Be open and respectful of others’ perspectives**, convictions, *listen to their story*. Be tolerant, seek to learn and understand from a spirit of inquiry, from belief in a particular person, Jesus, to a universal vision, inclusive love, recognition that the Spirit can break through in new ways. Caution for the shadow side—cheap tolerance is open to anything because it is not grounded anywhere; could see Mother Teresa and Osama bin Laden as having a right to their values, seeing neither as better than the other.
- In looking for ways to avoid clashes, avoid two extremes of religious perspective.
 - Focus only on religious differences. Sees no need for dialogue. Says what is important about each tradition is the way it differs from others and is better than others. Christian voice will speak only what is specific to our understanding of Christianity and not look for common ground, anything similar to others is unimportant. For example, consider the past of Catholicism—no conversation with Protestants; no conversation with the mega-churches. Exclusivist in orientation.
 - In reaction to the first focus, we have the suggestions that all religions are fundamentally the same beyond the externals. This is a pluralistic perspective. It reduces religious diversity to an underlying sameness. Disrespects religious particularities/uniqueness/source of enrichment for others. “Hey, we all believe in the same God.”
 - There is another response to exclusivist religion, secularism, that is, avoid faith all together to be non-biased. This ends up with the bias or dogma of secularism, relativism which can be as dogmatic as any religion.
- Best response to religious or faith-based difference is good “give and take” dialogue seeking mutual understanding of each other as persons. Look at particular elements of each faith which may overlap with, differ from, or contradict some element of other religions.
 - Learn how to share differing perspectives by core value of fostering a culture of peace and love. Love doesn’t mean agreement and approval. It means benevolence, even in the midst of disagreement. This is just civil discourse.
 - Need to get beyond the mutual suspicion between religious and secular America.
 - We are in the midst of discussion on how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.
 - Democracy demands that religious Americans translate their concerns into core values, universal principles that can be discussed. For example, respect for life, the child in the womb, and ethic of life. It also demands that secularists make room for faith and morality. For example, the concern for health care.
 - Religious people need to recognize they do not have a monopoly on the desire to be a moral person.

- Secularists see they are wrong when they asked believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public realm. Douglas, Lincoln, Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, King—the majority of great reformers in American history were motivated by faith, and they repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause.
- Solving problems of respect for life, poverty, racism, lack of health care which are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness requires both **personal** and **social responsibility**.
 - Solving these problems will require changes in government policy and changes in hearts and minds. There exists a hole in people’s hearts that the government alone cannot fix.
 - To say that people should not interject their personal morality in public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is, by definition, a codification of morality, and much of it is grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- Civil Conversation involves
 - Looking for overlapping values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the moral direction of our country. We did this with the civil rights movement.
 - Need to build tentative partnerships between religious and secular people of goodwill. Look for common ground, for example, in working together on issues of human life and dignity – such as providing healthcare to expectant parents, who are below the poverty line.
 - Religious leaders need to understand the critical role separation of church and state has played in preserving not only our democracy but also the robustness of our nation’s religious practice.
 - It was not the atheists or civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of the First Amendment. It was the committed religious who were most adamant about not mingling government with religion because they did not want state-sponsored religion hindering their ability to practice their faith as they understood it.
 - First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to

assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

- Any reconciliation between faith and democratic pluralism requires some sense of proportion. Sort out the boundaries between church and state. Not every mention of God in public is a breach of the wall of separation—context matters. Pledge of Allegiance, In God we trust, voluntary student prayer on school property.
- At the same time do not use religion as a tool of attack. Don’t use faith to belittle.
- Have a secure identify in our specific faith. And have permeable boundaries through which we learn and teach, be enriched and enrich, come to some new agreements, dream up new possibilities. Have an attitude in sync with the command to love neighbor and even enemy. Be instruments of love.
- Removal of disagreements and conflict may not even be desirable. Public life without disagreement is a utopian dream and could do more harm than good. The clash of ideas helps us to grown. Public faith in a pluralistic world will lead to the clash of ideas; this is the sound of freedom.
- Individual and groups will continue to disagree and argue. Can we argue productively and civilly as friends or at least as fellow citizens rather than destructively as enemies?
- When we vote it should be not just **whom** we choose and **what** issues we support. Each of us should take an honest look inward to determine **why** we are voting in the way we are. Is our motive too self-centered, only looking at what is this going to cost me or how will this benefits me? We should focus upon affirming the dignity of every human being, fostering collaborative, principle centered communities, everyone together working for the common good.

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