

“FAITH AND THE ELECTION”
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There’s a well-known passage in the gospels, in which Jesus is asked, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” We’re told that this is done in order to “test” him. Jesus’ famous – and cryptic - reply is “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” Like many of Jesus’ sayings, it raises more questions than it answers – which is, no doubt, exactly what he intended.

As it happens, this was the passage prescribed for reading in mainline Christian churches last week. It’s part of a three-year cycle of biblical readings known as the “lectionary.” A colleague of mine preached on the passage, not mentioning the election at all.

But after the service, he says, in the greeting line, one of his congregants accosted him: “How *dare* you endorse McCain from the pulpit?” This took him aback – but not as much as a few minutes later, when someone else came through the line. This time, the question was, “How *dare* you endorse Obama from the pulpit?”

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This incident reminds us how emotionally charged the election has become, and how easy it is to project our own hopes and fears, and to read into what’s said something that isn’t there. It also reminds us, in a back-door kind of way, that tax-exempt institutions, including congregations, are not supposed to endorse candidates for public office. This is part of the Internal Revenue code, but in my opinion there are sound reasons behind it.

Making connections between faith and politics is a hazardous enterprise. We walk a fine line between one of two dangers. One of these is to identify a specific candidate, or political platform, with a specific religious perspective, or even the will of God. It’s to suggest that *of course* all faithful Christians believe X about Issue Y - or that *of course* all good Unitarian Universalists support Candidate Z. Such suggestions undercut the ideal of inclusive community, where we welcome people of differing perspectives.

There’s a difference between saying, “Based on my faith and my reason, here’s what I *think* is the best approach to this particular issue,” and saying, “God has spoken; this is the *only* correct position.” Even when our convictions are strong – and we have the right to have strong convictions - humility is in order.

As Abraham Lincoln said, during the dark days of the Civil War, “it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party.” And when Northern clergy asked Lincoln to pray for God to be on the side of the Union, he replied, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side.”

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The second danger is to treat religious faith as though it were a purely private matter, with no bearing on public policy. John F. Kennedy seems to have done this in his 1960 presidential campaign. In a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Kennedy tried to reassure Protestants that they need not fear a Catholic president, saying, “I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affair.”

Now, if you read the whole speech, it’s clear that JFK’s real concern was religious discrimination in public life. Later in the speech, he said, “While this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been – and may someday be again – a Jew, or a Quaker, or a Unitarian, or a Baptist.” But in defending the Constitution, which forbids the use of any “religious test” for public office, he may have said more than he intended.

It’s one thing to say that candidates for public office should be chosen on the basis of their qualifications, not their religious beliefs. It’s quite another matter to say that religious faith should be purely private, with no bearing on public policy. In the 2004 presidential primaries, Democratic hopeful Howard Dean said that the election should stay away from “guns, God, gays, abortion, and all this controversial stuff.” But as Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, rejoined, “Where would we be if Martin Luther King Jr. had kept his faith to himself?”

To the extent that the Christian right has unified political positions, I probably disagree with most of them. But that’s different from saying they have no right to bring their faith perspective into the public conversation. They have every right to do that – just as we have the right to take positions based on our religious faith, and to say so publicly.

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Actually, the very *idea* of “private religion” is quite new – at most, only a few hundred years old. Until then, religion was always profoundly public. Consider the origin of the word “church.” In Greek, the church is the *ekklesia*, which means “the public assembly” or “the public square.” Broken down into its root words, *ek-klesia* means “summoned out.” The church, then, *is* the public assembly - the people summoned out from their homes to the public square.

What that means is subject to interpretation. Historically, Unitarian Universalism has its roots in the Protestant Reformation, whose anniversary is later this week. In 16th century Europe, as Catholic hegemony was breaking up, the various Reformers had to wrestle with the question of church and state. As they wrestled, they developed many different answers. 500 years later, we can still see them playing out in the public square.

The first position is that of Martin Luther. Luther wrestled with the question of whether secular governments should be bound by Christian precepts. In response, he developed what became known as the “two kingdoms” theory. There is the kingdom of God, he said, consisting of “all proper believers in Christ.” And there is the kingdom of this world, presumably everyone else.

In Luther's view, God was in charge of both realms. Secular governments, he said, were of divine origin, created to control the worldly kingdom, and the "unruly spirits" within it. Because these governments were God's creation, Luther held that Christians owed allegiance to secular rulers. But he exempted these rulers from Christian precepts – he believed that God *intended* these authorities to rule by force, not by the gospel message of love and peace. In Luther's view, it would be absurd for secular rulers to try to rule by the gospel, because the gospel was meant only for Christians. Understanding Luther's perspective helps us understand how leaders who call themselves "Christian" might nevertheless initiate wars, or punch holes in the social safety net. Please note, though, that I said "understand" – approval is a different matter.

The second model is that of non-cooperation with the secular world. The Free Church tradition, or Radical Reformation, tended to take this view. This included pacifist groups, such as the Mennonites and Hutterites, and also the Socinians, precursors of Unitarians. Like Luther, the Radical Reformers believed in the existence of "two kingdoms." But unlike Luther, they believed that Christians owed allegiance to only one of them. They encouraged believers to separate from society and form their own pure Christian communities. They encouraged non-cooperation with secular authority, and the formation of a "kingdom of God on earth, a holy commonwealth."

Not all of these radical reformers were peaceful. Some of them advocated violence to achieve their ends: a holy war against the ungodly, the establishment of the pure kingdom by wiping out the opposition. Most, however, were peace-loving, and in fact separated from society to form pacifist communities. The Polish Socinians, who established a community in Rakow, based on the Sermon on the Mount, are an example.

Yet a third approach was that put forth by John Calvin. Calvin is one of the people UUs love to hate, but like it or not, he's part of our ancestry. Unlike either the Lutherans or the Radical Reformers, Calvin thought the secular world was capable of redemption. In his view, the worldly kingdom was capable of being *transformed* into the kingdom of God, and he encouraged the faithful to bring about the transformation. Calvin and his Puritan successors called for the building of "a city upon a hill."

Calvin's legacy is ambiguous. At its worst, his vision resulted in severely repressive theocracies, but it has a positive side that's worth remembering. It led to a tradition of social reform movements, in which early Unitarians and Universalists played a leading role. Among other causes, they campaigned for public schools, prison reform, women's suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and an end to capital punishment. And they would have been surprised to hear religion described as "a purely private matter."

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These social reformers, I think, give us an important key to answering the questions about faith and politics. What they did, over and over, was speak for those left out of the conversation, for those who had no voice. They spoke for African American slaves, women, children, prisoners, Native Americans - those for whom, in Langston Hughes' words, "America never was America." Sometimes they supported political parties;

sometimes they even founded them! But their *real* contribution of was empowering the powerless, giving a voice to the voiceless. When religion does this, that's when it's at its authentic best.

The coming election is critical, the stakes are very high – and not surprisingly, it's become extremely polarized. I suspect that people on *both* sides are wondering, “What will become of us if the other side wins?” I admit to having some of those fears myself.

What might be helpful, then, is to remember that we're not electing a savior – we're electing a president. No matter who wins, the new president will inherit a mess, and cleaning it up is likely to be a thankless job. Furthermore, the mess is one that both national parties had a hand in creating. The Bush presidency has been disastrous for our country, in my opinion – and both candidates have been working hard to distance themselves from the last eight years. But many of the foundations of it – deregulation, for example, and the dismantling of the social safety net - go back decades, and encompass both Democratic and Republican administrations.

No matter who wins this election, there will be plenty of work for us to do. Even if we achieve the result we're hoping for, it won't be a signal to sit back and be complacent. No matter who's in power, it will take alert and aroused citizens to hold them to their promise, and their promises.

And no matter who wins, there will still be those without power. There will still be those without a voice – and more often than not, without a vote. There will be those left out of the political conversation - those barely mentioned in the debates.

- ❖ There are Iraqi civilians, whose lives have been devastated by the war, and whose deaths are estimated in the hundreds of thousands, and may even exceed a million.
- ❖ There are those detained at Guantánamo, without charge and without trial, and those tortured in prisons like Abu Ghraib.
- ❖ There are those in the overcrowded, violent prisons of the U.S. – stripped of hope and dignity, caught up in machinery of the Prison-Industrial complex.
- ❖ There are immigrants, documented or not, who come here seeking a better life - but who find themselves turned into scapegoats, the targets of fear and hatred.
- ❖ There are the poor people in this country, the hungry and homeless - for whom much food bank assistance is drying up, and for whom a tax cut will be meaningless.
- ❖ There are the billions of people all over the world, who live on less than two dollars a day.

- ❖ There are the creatures of our beloved Planet Earth – whose species are going extinct at alarming rates. And there is Earth itself, whose resilience against human abuse is wearing dangerously thin.

All these cry out for our allegiance. Whatever the outcome on November 4, these will continue to demand our best thinking, our best courage, our best love.

Let me leave you with words of UU minister Wayne Arnason:

Take courage, friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are very high.

Take courage –
for deep down, there is another truth –
we are not alone.