Can Religion Save Politics? Can Politics Save Religion?"

A Roundtable with Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard, Ph.D., Shari Cohen, Ph.D., and Michael Gottsegen, Ph.D

Introduction

The nomination of Joseph Lieberman for vice president and George Bush's commitment to faith-based social services have provoked a new round of heated discussions over the role of religion in public life. These debates have revolved primarily around the long-standing divide over shoring up, versus tearing down, the legal wall of separation between church and state. Secondarily, they have focused on the necessity of reinvigorating religious and political institutions, which many see as dangerously weakened.

These essays emerged out of a pre-election roundtable discussion sponsored by the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL. This discussion sought to go beyond considering the battles over the First Amendment—such as those fought in court cases about school prayer or public menorahs—or making calls for increasing civic participation and membership in religious institutions. The premise of the roundtable was that the issues at stake in thinking about the future of religion and public life are not merely legalistic or organizational. Rather, it is necessary to frame the conversation in a broader context. We need to investigate how people are forming loyalties to purposes beyond themselves and their families in new ways, and how the functions and meanings of the political and religious realms are changing. A globalized economy, the pervasiveness of high-tech media, revolutions in biological and medical science, corporate influence over electoral politics: all of these change how we experience ourselves in relation to communities large and small. All of these will change how American Jews experience themselves as Jews, as Americans, as voters and congregants, and, for that matter, as workers, consumers, family members, and so on.

The essays that follow seek to offer insight into such issues.

In "*Markets and More*," Shari Cohen explores the extent to which the market has begun to take over some of the meaning-making functions of both religion and politics. What, she asks, are the implications when citizens and congregants seem to be transforming into customers and employees?

In "*Language of Hope*," Tsvi Blanchard suggests that religious language might in fact provide a powerful tool for making political life more meaningful. When it is "translated" into political discourse so as to be fully constitutional and inclusive,

he argues, religious language can engender new kinds of conversations about social and political possibility.

In "*After the Church-State Divide*," Michael Gottsegen asks, finally, whether we might be entering a period of "resynthesis" of religion and politics. We need to put the split between the religious and the political spheres into historical perspective, he argues, in order to understand the potential promise and pitfalls of keeping these arenas separate, as well as of letting them overlap.

Markets and More?

By Shari Cohen

The power of brands, the marketing of lifestyles, the impact of corporations on employees' sense of purpose and meaning, and the blurring of journalism, entertainment and advertising are challenging the place of both government and religion in shaping the way we form our loyalties, our commitments, and even our ethical positions. Surely any discussion of religion in public life needs to address the inexorable reach of commercialization into every aspect of human existence. We need to consider whether shopping and working are replacing social activism, civic duty or religious ritual as the boundaries between the roles of the customer, citizen, congregant and employee shift.

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As we now find ourselves at a moment in which the parameters of the relationship between religion and politics are being contested, it behooves us to rethink the relationship in light of its conceptual foundations and the history of its effects.

What this all means—either analytically or for the health of our public life—is not yet clear. We must start by acknowledging that this is a profound shift: commercialization is becoming increasingly intertwined with our very sense of self. Its impact is more far reaching than government outsourcing to corporations, even in such critical areas as education or social services, or than the corporate power over public policy and mindsets that Marxists have long protested. While we have historically seen the market as corrupting—in contrast to government and religion, which lift us above material interest—we need to ask whether we could come to understand the market differently. As corporations become more powerful, in many instances exceeding states in size and influence, they are likely to be the location and mechanism not only for forging common purposes but also for effecting social change.

By looking at five main areas—the market's monopolization of our time and attention; its increasing role in creating our loyalties and identifications; its shaping of our modes of thinking about individual choice; work's place in our lives, and the ways in which business might involve itself in critical aspects of social change—we can begin to sketch the crucial implications of these trends for independent thought, ethical sensibilities, collective action and human expression.

In his recent book, *The Age of Access*, Jeremy Rifkin points out that what distinguishes the current "knowledge economy" from prior periods of capitalism is the increasing reach of the market into the cultural sphere. Consumption has always been a source of joy and pleasure in peoples' lives, but the commodification of nearly every relationship and interaction, facilitated by

information technology's extension of the scope of the market in both time and space, has produced a new phenomenon with which we need to reckon. Rifkin calls this the “commodification of play,” by which he means the “marketing of cultural resources including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements, spiritual and fraternal activity and civic engagement.”[i] This “experience economy” aims to provide not just “stuff”—goods and services—but access to higher purposes and community. Examples of the marketing of experience are not difficult to find: the trend towards museums as entertainment, with complete product lines associated with blockbuster exhibitions; the incorporation of spiritual practices like yoga into commercial ventures such as health clubs; hotels such as Las Vegas’ Bellagio, which replicates the Italian city for which it is named; and malls constructing themselves as town squares.

The market’s reach would not be nearly so pervasive were it not for the increasing sophistication of advertising techniques and of the technologies that convey commercial messages. After all, advertising is all about linking products to higher meanings and purposes such as beauty, love and transcendence. As Douglas Rushkoff argues in his recent book, *Coercion*, corporations, thanks to sophisticated market data and research on techniques of persuasion, are increasingly attuned to peoples’ longings, and increasingly adept at offering their products as the fulfillment of those longings. This is a refined version of a process that began early in our transition to a consumer economy, he points out, as manufacturers and retailers sought to make shopping into a new religion—complete with “atmospherics” devoted to simulating quasi-religious environments.[ii] What's different now? Never before have religion and public purposes been so little able to compete with the market.

Unlike nations or religions, corporations demand little in return from their “constituents.”

Both religion and political life have been vitiated, in large part, as a consequence of the division of labor that reigns between them.

The market’s monopolization of ever greater spheres of time and attention raises important questions: Should religious, civic and government leaders work to counter this trend, which appears to make all human experiences into business transactions and has enormous impact on how individuals form their opinions as citizens? How would they do this? Must market pervasiveness necessarily be seen as antithetical to the public good? Defenders of the market's contribution to the social good have long argued that capitalism fosters new sorts of cross-cultural understanding and empathy. Clearly commercial places like Starbucks or Barnes and Noble foster public discourse, albeit in a way different from traditional cafes or public libraries, which demanded little or no money from their patrons.

The market has captured more than our time and attention. It is increasingly shaping our identifications, loyalties, and the basis for our communities. If loyalty

was once to God and then to the nation, now it is to Nike or Apple or Starbucks. It is not that any individual brand is replacing the kinds of allegiances people have historically given their countries, their tribes or their religions. No one, at least not yet, would fight and die for IBM. But brands are resilient in the face of a trend towards the decline of loyalties to institutions of all sorts. Unlike nations or religions, corporations demand little in return from their "constituents."

At the same time, the lifestyles purveyed in places like Niketown or DKNY are actively succeeding in forging individuals' sense of who they are. Even a rising interest in spirituality has added to, rather than diminished, the power of brands, as corporations appropriate religious or spiritual imagery. Aveda's coffee-table style *Book of Rituals*—which elaborates daily health and beauty rituals, all of which include the use of Aveda products—is a good example. And, as Michael J. Weiss pointed out in his recent book, *The Clustered World*, consumption patterns "have become a force more potent than race, geography, gender or ideology in shaping voter attitudes."[iii]

More and more companies even go beyond shaping individual identities to create "communities of interest" around products or around topics related to these products, whether this is the Harley-Davidson community, or the community of people who own Apple computers. Indeed, community life itself becomes a commodity. This is particularly evident in online communities, such as I-Village and Blackplanet.com, both of which are "selling" connection to other people—around gender in the first case, and ethnicity in the second. We can also see community for sale in places like Celebration, created by Disney as a planned community to simulate older-style small towns, and advertised as an antidote to suburban sprawl.

But to note that such communities are highly commodified does not necessarily imply that they are not real, or that relationships generated there remain rooted merely in fleeting mercenary transactions. Beliefnet.com, for example, is an interesting hybrid that demonstrates some of the potentially positive effects of the marketization of meaning-making. This for-profit, advertiser-funded, online magazine and community Web site offers a vast spectrum of organized and not-so-organized religion all in one place. It sells, among other things, religious and spiritual products—from books and CD's, to ritual objects, to candles and meditation mats. But though Beliefnet.com commercializes religious discussion and community, it also enables a type of cross-religious interaction. This is due to the potential that web interaction offers for anonymous, low-commitment participation, and to the fact that the market does not privilege any particular religions, except those that sell. The Web site undermines the power of any single religion, and of religious authorities, by giving users access to one another and other traditions without any sanction. This does not mean that power is absent on the site, or that power resides only in the hands of the users. The ultimate arbiters are the corporate backers of the site and the site's editors and "community managers," the people who choose content, moderate, and create

the frameworks for online interactions. Still, Beliefnet.com suggests how the market can create new spaces for beneficial social interaction. Does this mean we need new ways of thinking about the market's potential for serving elevated purposes, even as we keep in mind its well-known corrupting potential? Does it offer a glimpse into how our current understanding of the boundaries between what is civic, what is commercial, and what is religious might shift?

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Even beyond corporate construction of loyalty, identity and community, the very idea of the market—the metaphor or mindset of buying and selling—has come increasingly to shape our understanding of the exercise of free choice in both religious and civic life. In a recent book called *Spiritual Marketplace*, Wade Clark Roof demonstrates that baby boomers increasingly approach their religious identities from a consumer perspective. This means forging one's religious life as a consumer choice from among a range of possibilities in the marketplace, rather than taking on one's religion of birth. Whether at a site such as Beliefnet.com, or in the spirituality section of Barnes and Noble, or through multiple memberships in different religions institutions, or in spiritual stores that offer a range of eastern practices—from massage to meditation—individuals are circumventing religious authorities and hierarchical religious institutions as they search for their own sense of religious or spiritual identity. How does this new sense of individual empowerment affect the public sphere and our role as citizens? Frequent opinion polls and the energy expended by candidates selling their policies suggest that this trend affects party loyalty and voting as much as it does religious practice and sensibility. In a world shaped by consumer mindsets, power resides in new places. This suggests that we will need to rethink the fundamental social and political questions of accountability and efficacy.

The workplace in a knowledge economy is another window into the profound impact of increasing commercialization on how and where we connect to purposes larger than the self. An outpouring of books on spirituality in the workplace, for instance, is symptomatic of the increasingly important role that work plays as a locus of meaning and identification. If work, rather than family or other arenas, is where people most seek and find their sense of higher purpose, this means that employers come to function as arbiters of employee's spiritual lives and personal growth. Institutions such as Motorola University, for instance, take responsibility for the continuing education of Motorola's employees, while attending to it in a corporate context. Corporate retreats and leadership training programs draw upon spiritual techniques and ask employees to speculate about the personal meaning they find in their work. Books like *Reawakening the Spirit in Work*, by Jack Hawley, or *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, by Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton, reflect a serious trend toward embracing spirituality in the workplace, not just for the purpose of increasing profits, but for its own sake as

well. According to Hawley (writing in 1993), "The key question for today's managers and leaders are no longer issues of task and structure but are questions of the spirit."[iv] Indeed, many of the last decade's most lasting and widespread new ideas about the pursuit of meaning have come out of the literature on business leadership and management. Might corporations increasingly outsource to religious institutions for the purpose of employee development? Might religious leaders find themselves employed in corporate settings rather than in churches or synagogues?

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The magazine *Fast Company*—which has become the voice for "new economy" businesses that see themselves as a revolutionary force in society at large—or the "business for social responsibility" movement also show how the boundaries between work and cause, between the secular and the sacred, are shifting. Companies like Ben and Jerry's or Working Assets base their business choices on criteria that include social contribution as well as profit, thereby making business success a mechanism for social change. They use the terminology of “spirituality” and “the soul” in articulating their business practices and the ethic they hope to instill among their employees. Moreover, social change is an important part of the product they offer to consumers. The "business for social responsibility" movement boasts that 9-13% of investment assets under professional management use ethical and social screening criteria. This raises a number of questions: Are companies like Working Assets filling a vacuum left by political activism, or by politics itself? Are they replacing street protests as a means of expressing political concerns?

As business becomes more of a social cause for some (either as employees, as entrepreneurs or as consumers), we might increasingly see new melding of market and ethical concerns. This is particularly likely given the fast pace of technological change—both in communications technology and in biotechnology—relative to the slow pace of decision-making about governmental regulation. Even in companies not concerned with social change per se, we might increasingly see a new type of ethical self-regulation.

The early Internet entrepreneurs, for instance, understood that the choices they were making were going to shape society in significant ways. They knew that their actions had implications not only for how Internet access, privacy and commercialization would affect society at large, but also for such broad legal and philosophical issues as the meaning of property and authority. These

entrepreneurs have had to grapple with reconciling the values of hacker libertarianism, competitive entrepreneurship and scientific collaboration.

Religion might well have a role to play in such ethical dilemmas in the business world. Biotech firms at the cutting edge of genetic engineering have formed their own ethical advisory boards in anticipation of emerging public concerns about the ethical implications of their work. Celera, the company that led the way in mapping the human genome, took on the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, which includes at least one rabbi and numerous ethicists on its staff, for this purpose. Thus groupings of religious authorities and academic ethicists, operating within corporate contexts, could come to take over the regulatory role that government might no longer play. Other new combinations must be considered if we are to think creatively about, and anticipate, new challenges.

Whether or not the amoral market could substitute in important ways as a generator of the common good for either the religious or the political spheres is yet to be seen. However, without shifting our perspective about the likelihood that the market could play this role, and without reconsidering the changing boundaries between these spheres, we will not understand the opportunities and constraints that these changes pose for developing creative policies to address socially significant priorities. The chaos of urban sprawl suggests that the market cannot be left to its own devices in the area of sustainable development. What could turn out to be the unfettered development of powerful life-altering technologies poses another critical challenge.

All these shifts, of course, require that those who see themselves as involved primarily with religion and politics, not with commerce, begin to think about their roles differently. How religious and political leaders understand the power and role of the market will affect every aspect of their work—it will shape the way they think about structuring their institutions, it will determine how they make their alliances, interpret their mandate, preach to their congregants and campaign to constituencies. The debate about church-state relations must, thus, be cast in these much larger terms. At stake is the very social glue that holds us together as a society.

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[i] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 7.

[ii] Douglas Rushkoff, *Coercion: Why We Listen to What 'They' Say* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 77-79.

[iii] Michael Weiss, *The Clustered World* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2000), p. 37.

[iv] Jack Hawley, *Reawakening the Spirit in Work* (New York: Fireside, 1993), p. 1.

LANGUAGE OF HOPE

By Tsvi Blanchard

Like many Americans, I have been, and basically still am, committed to discussing public policy issues in religion-neutral, secular language. Yet I find myself increasingly persuaded that those of us concerned with the political sphere should now be willing to consciously include some carefully delineated forms of religious rhetoric. Why? Because religious rhetoric could stimulate greater popular participation in public discussion of the serious issues we currently face as a society. But we should deploy such language *carefully*, without undermining the Constitutional principle of the separation of Church and State, and without proselytizing to, and thus alienating, those who consider themselves strictly secular.

Religious rhetoric could stimulate greater popular participation in public discussion of the serious issues we currently face as a society.

As we now find ourselves at a moment in which the parameters of the relationship between religion and politics are being contested, it behooves us to rethink the relationship in light of its conceptual foundations and the history of its effects.

Although I see newly emerging political possibilities—from global grassroots activism to local environmental initiatives—as indications that our political institutions are hardly moribund, I remain concerned about how few young Americans see the public square as a place to invest their lives.

Opinion polls repeatedly reveal that many Americans do not believe that anything of real value can be achieved in politics. Years on campus and in political organizing have shown me, as well as many others, that there is a pervasive belief that there are no viable alternatives to "the way things are." There is also a widespread belief that political idealism—usually associated with what is seen as the failed politics of the sixties—is naïve and foolish.

One (though certainly not the only) way to address this concern is to enrich the public language in which we "do politics" by drawing on religious discourse. In some ways, religious language already plays an animating role in American political debate. From the religiously conservative discourse of Christian evangelicals and *Commentary* magazine to the liberal ideology of the World Council of Churches and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, it is evident that religious language can still motivate many Americans to involve themselves in the political process.

The many Americans who enthusiastically purchased the Dalai Lama's *Ethics for the New Millennium* demonstrated the cultural power of ideas drawn from

religion. This book uses a modified Tibetan Buddhist religious language to lay out a vision that goes beyond individual happiness to issues of worldwide social and political well-being. Its three-month tenure on *The New York Times* bestseller list suggests that, appropriately modified, religious language might motivate people to take action in the political sphere.

What effective religious language lends to politics is a contemporary political language of hopeCa way of speaking that reflects a basic confidence in the power of collective human activity to change social realities.

Both religion and political life have been vitiated, in large part, as a consequence of the division of labor that reigns between them.

What effective religious language lends to politics is a contemporary political *language of hope*Ca way of speaking that reflects a basic confidence in the power of collective human activity to change social realities. In the United States, for example, SojournersCa progressive Christian group which focuses on social and political issues—has created a popular sweatshirt that reads, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change." In his three-volume work *The Principle of Hope*,[i] German political and social theorist Ernst Bloch makes a strong argument for the integral links between hope, imagination and political action. Developing an American language of hope, then, might help overcome the widespread disaffection with civic life that accompanies the hopelessness about any possibility for effecting political change.

To be sure, fully responding to present concerns about civic engagement and political participation requires more than a change in language. Language alone cannot do everything—change unfair power relations, remedy inequalities, care for the vulnerable. Nonetheless, there is no robust public life without robust public language. Hence, I want to focus on the possible use of religious language to reinvigorate some aspects of contemporary political debate.

I want to be clear from the outset that I favor the use of religiously neutral language in arguments for specific government policies. Even though explicitly religious arguments are constitutionally permitted as the exercise of free speech, I believe, as a matter of principle, that public policy should be discussed in a maximally inclusive language that does not alienate or exclude religious minorities or those who have no religion at all. I do not advocate religious rhetoric that would effectively exclude those uncomfortable with religious language from debates over policy.

Furthermore, from a purely practical standpoint, I am convinced that supporting policy positions by using language linked to particular religions alienates more Americans than it attracts. Consider, for instance, the political debate about

abortion. Based on their particular religious commitments—Roman Catholic or Evangelical Christian—some Americans oppose abortion from the moment of conception. In the public debate over whether and to what extent abortion should be made illegal, they have become highly invested in convincing others that human life begins at conception. But introducing what were clearly partisan religious arguments in support of campaigns for a national law or constitutional amendment about when human life begins did their cause far more harm than good. Where they have succeeded, it has been primarily due not to the use of persuasion, but to the open use of political clout. When religion and religious institutions function as interest groups, they are hardly likely to renew the American political sphere.

Using the Jesus-laden language of the fundamentalist Christian right, for example, would in fact exclude the many Americans who find it unpalatable. On the blockbuster TV show *Survivor I*, Dirk Been was unpopular in part because, according to *The New York Times*, he "talked about the Bible too much."[ii] We will not invigorate political discussionCand with it our public lifeCunless we use a language that resonates with a broad range of Americans.

In contemporary America, religious languages possess powerful moral resonance in ways that political languages do not.

Time and again, the religions have broken free from their narrow confines to launch crusades on behalf of economic and political justice.

Religious language *can* do this when specific policy issues are not being debated. At their best, both political and religious languages seek to mobilize our capacity for hope. At present, many Americans are exhausted by a political rhetoric they perceive as nothing more than a thinly veiled discourse of power plays and resource grabbing. As a result, they are not able to draw on the rich resources for hope that exist in our inherited political language. In contrast, as I have already indicated, there are growing social forces willing and able to create a language of political hope by drawing on the power of inherited religious language to imagine a better world in which the pain of the existing economic, political and cultural arrangements is overcome.

In contemporary America, religious languages possess powerful moral resonance in ways that political languages do not. Even scientific or artistic languages—focused as they are on "objective" analysis or individual vision—are not likely to provide the sort of force of conscience that religious language brings. In the past, the power of ideas and images that originated in the language of inherited Western religious textsC*a world at peace, liberty for all*Cmobilized people to express and work for transformative political visions. I am suggesting that today as well we may partly address the loss of political hope by tapping into the rhetorical power that morally imaginative religious language possesses.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush repeatedly characterized his political approach as “compassionate conservatism.” “Compassion,” for many, suggests a value deeply rooted in traditional religion. When I entered “compassion” in a keyword search at Amazon.com, eleven of the top twenty books listed, and two of the top three, used “compassion” in a religious sense.

Despite the religious provenance and overtones of the term “compassion,” Bush never explicitly identified the term with any particular religious tradition. Similarly, when the Dalai Lama used “compassion,” and its Tibetan Buddhist equivalent *nying je*, in his *Ethics for a New Millennium*, this did not prevent him from assuring the reader that his book was not “religious”Calthough he did call it “spiritual.”

Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” favors non-governmental means for meeting America’s social welfare needs. In practice, this would entail eliminating many of the government programs that address these needs. For example, it might entail denying government health care benefits to many children. Compassionate concern for the plight of “the losers” in the economic game would be expressed through a shift in emphasis to non-governmental sources of support.

Bush’s opponents did not take on the issue of moral compassion directly. Instead, they limited themselves to arguing that his use of the term “compassionate conservatism” was in bad faith, nothing more than a rhetorical device designed to make conservatives feel better about doing away with government social welfare programs. I would suggest that Bush’s opponents would have been better off using his invocation of “compassion” as an opportunity to cast the debate in moral terms. I believe that this would have opened the door to engaging many who might otherwise not have been engaged, or whose ideas about compassion differed from conservatives’ ideas.

Imagine how the political debate might have proceeded if those moved by the language of *Ethics for a New Millennium* had participated. How different the debate might have been if Mr. Bush’s opponents had responded to his call for compassionate conservatism by declaring: “We agree, Mr. Bush, that America needs a compassionate policy, but do you not also agree that if we are to be truly compassionate we must recognize ‘ourselves in all others—especially those who are disadvantaged and those whose rights are not respected?’[iii] If so, can we sincerely believe that it is compassionate to shift the health care needs of the vulnerable to a market system that is already failing them?”

Whatever our political stance on crucial American social welfare policy issues, we must admit that Bush’s use of “compassion” would then have provided an effective trigger for greater public engagement with these issues by *both* conservatives and liberals.

As native speakers stretch to find persuasive ways of bringing their language into a shared language of political discussion, they are likely to find that, even without meaning to, they are modifying the way they use some of the key terms in their particular religious language.

From what quarter might a social force arise that is powerful enough to counter the coercive logic of economic necessity?

Using religious language to enrich political debate will not only change political language; significant contact between two languages, like significant contact between two cultures, affects both languages. My argument should raise concerns, then, for "native speakers" of particular religious languages—those who frame their lives in terms of a particular religion and its way of speaking about human questions. As native speakers stretch to find persuasive ways of bringing their language into a shared language of political discussion, they are likely to find that, even without meaning to, they are modifying the way they use some of the key terms in their particular religious language.

Native speakers should anticipate that the deliberate integration of religious language would have far greater effects on original meanings than those caused by casual contact between two languages and their supporting cultures. In order to offer their concepts in a politically relevant way, native speakers will have to transcend the conceptual and linguistic limits of their own particular religious traditions. We can speak in a shared public square only if we are willing to trade some of our particular ways of speaking for those we can learn to hold in common.

Ethics for the New Millennium provides a good example of what happens when one modifies the use of an inherited religious term in order to speak in a politically and socially relevant way. The Tibetan term *nying je,* translated as "compassion," is intimately connected with Buddhism's overall project of liberating human beings from the unbearable suffering of *samsara*C"the dreamlike nature of the reality that sentient beings experience."[iv] Tibetan Buddhism especially values the *boddhicitta*, an attitude of loving kindness and compassion that seeks the liberation of all sentient beings, including animals. The development of this attitude is supported by the traditional Tibetan Buddhist belief that all sentient beings were once our mothers [or parents] and acted "in some protective capacity toward us."[v]

The Dalai Lama himself recognized that, had he insisted upon a precise definition of *nying je* in his English language book, and spelled out all the connotations this concept has within Tibetan Buddhism, there would have been little chance that the book could have influenced so wide an audience.

The benefits of the Dalai Lama's choice to "translate" his native Tibetan into terms relevant to contemporary Westerners required surrendering key parts of

the inherited Tibetan Buddhist conceptual scheme. In *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the human suffering that the virtue of compassion is called upon to address is depicted as an unpleasant but limited part of the otherwise pleasant reality of human life. This contraction of the Buddhist concept of suffering (which equates life itself with suffering) made the book more accessible because, although most contemporary Americans want to suffer less, they do not see Buddhist liberation as either necessary or desirable. Moreover, "compassion," unlike *nying je*, in no way derives from a belief that all sentient beingsChuman and animalConce nurtured us or from its assumption of the truths of rebirth and reincarnation.

The Dalai Lama was surely correct, then, in believing that the term "compassion" would speak to those who would otherwise be put off by the beliefs associated with the Tibetan concept of *nying je*. For the Dalai Lama, this lack of precision was a price worth paying in order to speak out about the pressing Western issues that so deeply concerned him.

As a "native speaker" of Tibetan Buddhist language, however, the Dalai Lama must have been aware of the potential costs to Tibetan Buddhism should the Americanized concept of compassion come to displace the meaning of *nying je* for Tibetans. Such a shift away from the project of radical liberation would undermine the *raison d'etre* of Tibetan Buddhism. Weakening the traditional Tibetan language would only make the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist culture in exileCone of the Dalai Lama's most valued projects—more difficult. All things considered, Tibetan Buddhism would be better served if the translation of *nying je* as "compassion" were restricted to the Western public square, while the classical meaning of *nying je* remained more or less in place for native, and would-be native, speakers.

Translating a particular religious language into the very different language of the American public square is, then, a difficult proposition. If "native speakers" can remain aware, however, that they are engaged in translation, and thus that different meanings are in play in the religious sphere and in the public sphere, the difficulty is well worth it. Integrating the imaginative and visionary power of religious language into American political discussion is a much needed first step toward reinvigorating an increasingly cynical and apathetic American political realm. What our politics lacks is hope, and it is just this that a judicious incorporation of religious language might bring to our political life.

Once a shared language of hope finds a place in the political process, we will be better able to articulate, and believe in, the kind of creative, compelling visions of American society that would stimulate greater participation in political life.

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[i] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* vols. I-III (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

[ii] *New York Times*, June 4, 2001.

[iii] Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium (*New York: Riverhead Books), p. 130.

[iv] Kalu Rinpoche, *Engendering Boddhcitta,*
http//www.kagyu.org/buddhism/tra/tra04.html.

[v] Khenjo Karthar Rinpoche, *The Practice of Loving-kindness and Compassion,*
http//www.kagyu.org/buddhism/tra/tra05.html.

After the Church-State Divide

By Michael Gottsegen

At its best, politics expresses the active solidarity of the citizenry, as each citizen aspires on behalf of a common good that is the good of all. The roots of this active solidarity are, however, pre-political or social. In a society that is divided by great disparities of wealth, for example, the socio-economic basis of active solidarity is likely to be missing. But the political manifestation of active solidarity is also dependent upon the prior orientation of the collective imagination and the quality of fellow feeling that connects the members of the social whole. The politics of active solidarity depends, in short, upon both a broadly diffused *feeling* of solidarity and upon the idea that the aggregation of individual citizens comprises a single and substantial whole. Today both of these preconditions of a healthy political life are in substantial measure lacking and, consequently, our politics is in trouble.

In the context of this analysis, the American religions become significant as potential sources of political renewal because, even in late modernity, they continue to play the important role of shaping their adherents' vision of the larger social whole and of cultivating the feelings of social solidarity that are the pre-political bases of the political life. Religions play this role for their adherents necessarily. Whether they play it in a manner that is conducive to the good health of the American polity is another question entirely. The religious orientation that would be the most conducive to the health of the polity would foster the widest social solidarity and the most expansive social vision. It would also emphasize the religious significance of political participation on behalf of the realization of the common good.

Presently, however, the American religions are not generally playing this role, either because they have defined the range of properly religious concerns too narrowly or because they have failed to render the circle of social solidarity and fellow feeling sufficiently inclusive. This is not entirely the fault of the religions. A long and complicated history of church-state relations in the West, and in the United States in particular, has produced the present arrangement in which the religious domain is cordoned off from the other areas of life and has come to be equated with the family circle and private morality. In the opinion of most Americans, political and economic questions, in particular, lie outside the proper range of religious concern, and the religions have largely acceded to this reality by redrawing their orbit of concern accordingly.

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In recent years, however, a host of forcesCsocial, cultural, political and economicChas conspired to reopen the question of the proper relationship between religion and politics. For many Americans, and for liberals especially, it is axiomatic that the erection of a high wall of separation has been an unalloyed good. The long history of religious intolerance and persecution amply demonstrates, in their opinion, that combining religion and politics produces a mixture that is noxious and volatile (and too often lethal). They also avow that religion is properly a private matter of conscience and that as such it has no proper business in the public square. What liberals cannot imagine, however, is that the extrusion of religion from political life has deprived political life of something that it needs for its own health and vitality. But as we now find ourselves at a moment in which the parameters of the relationship between religion and politics are being contested, it behooves us to rethink the relationship in light of its conceptual foundations and the history of its effects. It may be that by so doing we shall hit upon another way of constructing this relationship that could enable the American religions to play an important part in revitalizing American political life.

As alluded to above, modern living presupposes a high degree of compartmentalization. Life's many spheres are separated from one another: home from work, economics from politics, public from private. It is not only that these spheres are separated, but that they are also understood to operate according to different rulesCaccording to rules that are unique to each sphere and without application to any other.

In many ways, this compartmentalization has been a boon to our collective life. The market, unshackled by external restraints of religion and ethics, has become a powerhouse creating economic abundance and material well-being for many. At the same time, our unsanctified polity and secular society have been spared the noxious effects of religious intolerance and have enjoyed the benefits that flow from the personal freedoms of thought, association and expression that many religions have typically been unwilling to allow.

In recent decades, however, the downside of compartmentalization has become more manifest. Both religion and political life have been vitiated, in large part, as a consequence of the division of labor that reigns between them. Religion, restricted to the private domain, lacks scope and has become narcissistic and self-absorbed. Political life, left to its own autonomous logic of power and dominated by special interests, has ceased to generate the social solidarity and democratic energies that the system requires if the common good is to prevail in the long run.

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The separation of life into different spheres is itself not new. Since antiquity, we have carved life up into different sectors. Thus Aristotle, following the distinctions commonly accepted in Greek life, differentiated between the *polis* (public square) and the *oikos* (household). What is new to modernity, however, is the notion that each sphere is largely autonomous, and that there are no master rules that apply across the board. In an earlier era, such an assertion would have been blasphemous. The categories of good and evil, of vice and virtue, were regarded as coextensive with the whole of life.

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church took the view that every sector of life fell within its orbit of concern. This same expansive definition of the extent of religion's proper reach is found in the Talmud. The rabbis' legislative competence encompassed not only the synagogue and the social relations of the household, but extended to the marketplace, the judge's chambers and the King's Council. To argue that religion had no business speaking to such issues would have seemed ridiculous. Does God's concern with the goodness of human action know any borders or limitations? Of course not! Nor then should the moral authority of the church or synagogue. The furor that greeted the publication of Machiavelli's *Prince* in 1513Cwhich asserted that political life should be governed by its own autonomous nature and not by Christian moralityCgives clear evidence of just how entrenched these assumptions were at the time.

What Machiavelli claimed for the autonomy of politics, Adam SmithCand the champions of capitalism more generally claimed for the autonomy of the market. Smith rejected the religiously grounded conventional wisdom that it was proper for government and custom to regulate commodity prices, working conditions and the market itself in order to more closely approach the Christian vision of an equitable social order. Smith argued that the least regulated marketplace functions best, guided, as it were, by an "invisible hand" that would lead to the common good. The representatives of the church fought against this new approach to economics both in England and on the Continent, and a shifting constellation of social forces has been arrayed on the side of continued government regulation of economic life ever since. But as compared with the Middle Ages, the ground had shifted. Until 1800, the burden was on those who argued against regulation of the economy. Since 1800, the burden has been on the proponents of increased regulation. Free market capitalism and its ideological proponents have defined the autonomous market sphere as a key element of the status quo.

Modernity, then, brought into being the autonomy of life's various spheres. This process was multifaceted. It was driven by economic, social, political and ideological elements, in configurations that varied from one country to another. In the course of this process, the "sacred canopy" that religion had once cast over the whole of life shrank. The church, no longer regarded as having a role to play in shaping society's moral order as a whole, saw its proper sphere of influence restricted to the hearth and the home. There alone were the religious virtues accorded any significance.

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In the West, the forced retreat of Christian religion into an increasingly circumscribed realm occurred only gradually over the course of several hundred years. For the Jews of the West, however, the contraction of the religious realm came with startling suddenness and swiftness in the first quarter of the 19th century when the Jews were granted civil and political rights. For many of those who mourn the loss of the "sacred canopy" that Judaism had cast over the whole of life before the hour of "Emancipation," this shrinkage of the religious realm is perceived as the "high price of admission" that an anti-Semitic Christian society levied upon the Jews. But, as we have noted, this contraction of the religious sphere was imposed upon Christianity as wellCalbeit more graduallyCin its passage to modernity.

However, as Stephen Carter points out in his most recent book, *God's Name in Vain*, the religions were not always content to accept the reduced position modernity assigned them.[i] Nor have the religions been willing to accept without question the notion that economics and politics fall outside the domain of their proper concern. Time and again, in fact, the religions have broken free from their narrow confines to launch crusades on behalf of economic and political justice. In effect, they were calling into question the autonomy of these spheres and insisting that the forms of injustice being perpetrated within them were issues of the greatest moral and religious importance. The Abolitionist Movement, for example, was a religious movement that unfolded in the political domain and challenged the economic definition of black men and women as property. The Prohibition Movement was also largely religious in its inspiration, as was the movement for civil rights. In more recent years, we have witnessed the incursion into politics of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. In each case, the autonomy of the political and economic realms was called into question by a religious movement that insisted on the rightful supremacy of the ethical dimension.

During the period of high modernity, these passing moments of religious engagement in the world beyond religion's "proper" domain of home and hearth have been important not only in themselves, but for their impact upon the quality of our public life. They have also been important for calling into question the very compartmentalization of domainsCand of the norms appropriate to themCthat has become synonymous with modernity.

In recent years, this compartmentalization has also been undermined by the dynamism of a global market that increasingly has undercut the autonomy of state and religion, and called into question whether they continue to be masters of their own domains. Machiavelli, even as he argued for the autonomy of politics, worried that the purity of political life might be corrupted by concentrations of private economic power that used politics to pursue their own particular good rather than the common weal. The growing influence of economic

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special interests in political life illustrates how justified this anxiety has proven to be.

When religion was first expelled from the public square, some hoped that religion would be strengthened in the process and, in effect, purified of the "contamination" brought on by its "unholy" involvement in the mundane business of political life. What few foresaw at the time was that once religion was consigned to the private sphere, it would cease to perform the important social function of conveying to individuals a sense of their place in the social and cosmic whole. Since 1800, a succession of political and social movements and ideologies have arisenCincluding various nationalisms and the workers' movements that have performed this "religious" function for their adherents, providing the social glue and sense of larger purpose that Christianity or Judaism once provided.

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Today, however, neither religion nor politics (nor nationalisms, nor workers' movements) performs this function. Religion has become increasingly sectarian and the churches have become increasingly self-absorbed. While the intimate face-to-face community of the congregation remains important for individuals as a site for fellow-feeling and solidarity, religious communities are increasingly likely to draw the circle of their neighborly concern rather narrowly, encompassing only the immediate fellowship group while excluding the wider civic community. Were another social institution performing this function of conveying a vivid conception of the social whole to every member of the community and of imparting to the citizen an activist commitment to community service, then the fact that religion is not doing this would be of far less significance. But when neither the political process nor religious institutions can impart this sense, the community is at risk, for surely this communitarian spirit will not come from a marketplace that imparts an ethos that is essentially antithetical to this spirit.

The market is a harsh taskmaster, but it need not call the tune forever. But from what quarter might a social force arise that is powerful enough to counter the coercive logic of economic necessity? The political sphere has no resources of its own that it can muster on behalf of the common good. Politics reflects the matrix of interests (mostly economic) that are arrayed in society as a whole, but seems incapable of summoning the citizens to pursue a common good that transcends these interests. Civic virtue, if it is to arise at all, must come from elsewhere. Might it come from the religious sphere?

What we *do* know is that at their best the churches, synagogues and mosques nurture the fellow-feeling, the solicitude for the other and the basic solidarity that

are the elementary building blocks from which a more encompassing civic community and politics can be constructed. What we do *not* know is whether these nuclei of community, which are at once attracted and repelled by politics and by one another, have the capacity and the will to do for America today what they have done for America at critical moments in the past: to go beyond the limits of their particularity to frame, and to act on behalf of, a wider conception of the civic community and of the common good. If lowering the wall between religion and politics (without lowering the constitutional wall between church and state) could help to revitalize the pre-political foundations of a healthy political life, then it would seem to be a step worth taking.

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1 Stephen Carter, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).