Religious Wisdom in the Public Sphere?

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If you believe the pundits, it seems as if we have reached a crossroads. The signs up ahead tell us that we must make a choice between the roads of a “God Bless America” religious infusion on the one side, and protection of an arid and lifeless public language which fails to address citizens’ moral concerns on the other. Those who speak out in favor of either of these approaches have continued to bicker, but we want to take this opportunity to point out that they have chosen to ignore one of the must crucial questions: How have the boundaries between what has been called “sacred” and what has been called “secular” changed in the broader society?

As the recent writings of sociologists Wade Clark Roof (*Spiritual Marketplace*, Princeton, 1999) and Philip Wexler (*Mystical Society*, Westview, 2000) suggest, widespread cultural phenomena such as the online multi-denominational Beliefnet.com, Oprah’s book club, and the kabbalah craze testify to the rise of a spirituality not linked to specific institutionalized forms, doctrines or policies. In some ways, it is misleading to call such spirituality either “faith” or “religion.” It is instead a search for the fullest possible expression of the human spirit.

This is a trend in spirituality that breaks down the inherited dichotomy between a completely de-spiritualized, entirely secular language on the one hand and a highly traditional religious language that speaks of specific practices and doctrines on the other hand. What is emerging out of it is a spiritual language that draws upon particular “wisdom traditions” that can be shared with all, whatever their faith or lack of it.

This language is still in its infancy. But over the next few years, we could well have an opportunity to shape new ways to talk about politics.

What would it mean to seize the opportunity to promote pluralist spiritual expression in the public square as a way of re-engaging us? Would this offer a path to stemming the tide of disinterest in participatory politics as indicated by polls?

Before we can answer that question, we’ll have to address the fears that such a suggestion provokes. Can we have a shared speech about political concerns that allows for spiritual expression without compromising the benefits Americans have enjoyed as a result of making an important, but not absolute, legal and social distinction between religious language and the language of public policy? Can we make a significant place for spirituality in the public square without, at the same time, allowing traditional religious language to permeate every area of our national policy deliberations?

To address these fears, we first need to distinguish between two kinds of debate over religion in the “public” realm, since “public” means different things at different times. In the first, participants are discussing the possible use of coercive public/governmental power, either directly or indirectly. For example, public policy debates in the areas of taxation, defense, social welfare and criminal law will directly involve questions about forcing people to comply with laws and rules even if they oppose them. Debates about using public/governmental resources to support certain actions, meanwhile, necessarily revolve around some level of government pressure or control. For example, certain proposed tax laws may not force anyone to buy a house, donate to charity or create art, but they would constitute government encouragement and reward for doing so.

A second kind of debate about the public realm, by contrast, concerns public issues traditionally unrelated to questions of governmental power. The “public square” here is the realm of civic life: civic associations, charities, voluntary societies. Because this realm has been seen as neither governmental nor coercive, there has been little resistance to the use of religious language in these circles, where it neither crosses constitutional lines nor offends anyone. No one objects that Habitat for Humanity, a response to the social problem of homelessness, uses openly religious language in describing itself. While non-Christians are welcome to participate, those that do understand from the beginning that the language of policy debates within the organization is explicitly Christian. This election campaign, of course, with its calls for handing over government social programs to precisely such religious and secular groups, has underscored how the distinction between these two kinds of “publics” has been blurred.

This move toward greater integration of the “governmental” public realm with the wider civic one—which includes both secular and religious associations—makes our question here that much more pressing. Can we offer our personal faith, religious beliefs or spiritual outlook in American policy discussions as a basis for coercing others? Put this way, it seems that the answer is obvious—no. Since many who presently speak with a religious voice in the public square seem to propose an absolute connection between their faith and specific public policies—across the spectrum of public life—it is important and often necessary to remind ourselves, publicly, that one citizen’s behavior cannot be forcefully restricted or compelled because of the religious texts or beliefs of other citizens, even if the others are in the majority.

Given both the present and historical consequences of allowing policy to be made by invoking specific religious doctrines, we should continue strongly protecting individuals against coercion on the basis of the religious beliefs of others. In addition, since in matters of traditional faith and belief there have proven to be serious irreducible differences, it is unlikely that our search for a

common language of public conversation will be helped by introducing specific faith/religious “policy” commitments. In a pluralist society, it seems wisest to say that the specific viewpoints of individual faith traditions do not belong in public debates as grounds for enacting either coercive or supportive policies.

This has a major impact on Jewish political life. If we are committed to putting aside our particular religious concerns as directly expressing or implying a set of public policy decisions, this means no one can say that the “Jewish position on (x) is (y).” For Jews, changing our way of speaking is important because now that we possess power, status and affluence, our language in the public realm has gained in force and influence.

How then can we use language in public policy conversations that connect to the animating power of moral and ethical concerns and passions in our lives? Is there a “third language” that we can cultivate to bridge a secular language of civics and politics on the one hand, and a language of empathy and meaning offered by religious “wisdom traditions” on the other? Is there a language that allows us to express what is genuinely important to our spirituality, but does not say that others must go along simply because we inherited a doctrine or religious system?

Those who remember the civil rights movement have an important example of how a powerful public language integrated spirituality without compromising governmental policy discussions. The explicitly spiritual language and methods of the civil rights movement used inherited religious language to motivate movement participants, as well as American society as a whole. Without accepting a particularly Christian spiritual tradition, many Americans were moved by the practice of “non-violent witnessing” or by movement songs such as “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me round, turn me round…” or “We shall overcome….”

At that time, a “third language” forged from inherited American cultural traditions and inherited spiritual “wisdom traditions” translated itself into powerful motivational support. Yet even while the civil rights movement mobilized spiritual language, it often did so with the aim of insisting on, and codifying in law, a secular discourse of race and rights. It thus exemplifies one limited, yet very powerful role for faith, religion and especially spirituality—a motivational force for real social and legal change.

It also taught us that however important we may recognize our specific religious faiths and commitments to be, there are times when a successfully shared human spirituality has even greater power than “a religion.” Being “spiritual,” we believe, once again will come to mean taking all wisdom traditions seriously.

Recent developments in our political culture suggest that we are entering an era when a “third language” that draws on both spiritual and secular meanings is indeed already emerging in public life, speaking the new language of spirituality

that is percolating through public culture. Take the realm of party politics, for instance. George W. Bush wants to make the policies of conservatism more acceptable by presenting them as “compassionate.” “Compassionate” is not meant to be specific to the Christian tradition, but echoes it nonetheless. In this political, policy-oriented “conversation,” the word “compassionate” —whatever one thinks of Bush’s use of it—is vocabulary building a shared “third language” which Jews, Buddhists and even those who think of themselves as “secular” understand.

The Democratic party, too, provides us with examples. The national “new covenant” that President Clinton has proposed draws on the term’s meanings in, for instance, Jewish or Puritan theology, even as it does not explicitly quote these traditions. It could just as well be picked up and used by a secularist who is committed to social solidarity. To be sure, “covenant” keeps much of its religious resonance, just as Bush’s use of “compassionate” does. Nevertheless, the word has entered our public discussion on its own, and thus has become part of a new shared “third language” that can and is being used to discuss political positions and policies. And no one is afraid that the separation of church and state has been violated.

Finally, consider an important theme at the recent Democratic national convention—“we can make things new again.” This trades on the theme of “renewal,” one of the most common and most powerful themes found in almost every wisdom tradition. Somehow, however, this theme has been disconnected from its implications in, for example, the system of born-again Christian theology. It is now made to serve a more diffuse shared American spirituality. In this contemporary American spirituality, as in human wisdom traditions in general, compassion, mutual human support and the possibility of renewal play important roles in influencing our social visions and the policies that support them.

This is not to say that such language has never been invoked before; rather, the way such language is functioning now is indicative of a new ethos we seek to understand and engage with productively.

If we begin now by fostering places where we can speak openly about the role of spirituality in forming our social visions, and put aside existing polarizations, we will change America, and may reconnect citizens to the animating spirit of democracy.