

Religion and Politics Today: Tearing Down Walls, Building Bridges

By Michael Gottsegen

In America religion is not something generic, but something plural and particular, something multiple and irreducible, something that is increasingly hard to characterize in any uniform way. In America, then, the question of the right relation between religion and politics is the question of the right relation between religious pluralism and politics. This question has both empirical and normative facets. The normative aspect is what interests me here. Thus the question becomes one of how the plurality of religious convictions, values and arguments (and hence how differences of religious conviction, value and argument) should make themselves manifest in this arena where persuasive speech rules, where issues of the day are debated, and decisions on matters of public significance are taken.^{1[1]} In this context, the public manifestation of religion is not as rite or symbol or as solemnizing benediction, but as appeal, as argument or as invocation of value. And given the reality of religious pluralism, the proper question is how the plurality of religious appeals, arguments and values ought to figure in a political realm that is populated by citizens who hold different creeds, practice different rites and perhaps worship different gods (if they worship or believe in any at all).

A number of different possibilities, with very different implications, present themselves.

But before proceeding to review these possibilities, we must note that the political process is such that, whether consciously intended by the political actors or not, the process itself necessarily expresses an understanding of the political community by its very mode of proceeding. In other words, when spoken on the political stage, our words do more than express our interests and opinions; beyond this, by our words we express and perform the civic union; we enact the practical meaning of *e pluribus unum*, the “from many one.” Even if we are gathered to deliberate upon something as innocuous as price supports for leather shoes made in Alaska, the meaning of *e pluribus unum* cannot help but be enacted. This is at once the glory and the challenge of political life.

Thus the seemingly practical challenge of mediating religious differences in the public square and in the political process is shown to be at the same time, on the symbolic level, the never absent challenge of manifesting *how* we are one people

even in the same moment in which we are disagreeing with one another about whatever topic happens to be under discussion.

Religion is like much else in our political life (ethnicity, class, race, regionality). At once it can connect us or separate us - connecting us to some and separating us from others. Appeals to religious values, beliefs and arguments thus can unite or divide, can signal commonality over difference or insinuate difference where commonality might have prevailed. Appeals to religion can differentiate oneself as "the other" or can be used to mark others as "the other."

That politics in our pluralist United States cannot help but to express the meaning of *e pluribus unum* leaves open the precise meaning that the political process will impute to this alchemical metaphor and task. How then shall we enact and constitute the mystery of our complex and internally differentiated national unity? Shall the norms we adopt render us one *over and against* our manyness? Shall they render us one as an *assertion* of the numerical majority's right to claim to speak for all and thereby to render invisible those who fall outside the putative one? Or shall they render us one in a manner that *incorporates* our manyness?

According to the first perspective, religious differences, like racial or gender differences ought not to figure in political life at all. The public square is where we appear as citizens - as nothing more and as nothing less - and where the accidental particularity of our private and social existence is transcended, overcome, denied standing. From this perspective, such details should be hidden behind a veil of invisibility. Accordingly, political arguments should appeal to the general interest of all citizens and should never be couched in the language of particularist or parochial appeals to a religious heritage or set of values that are not shared by all of one's fellow citizens. Rather, political argument should speak to each of us in terms of our common essence as citizens, and in effect define our citizenship as a shared quality that transcends all of the differences (religious and otherwise) that otherwise divide us. This view of public life, and of the discourse of public life, as radically secular and actively neutral has traditionally held a certain appeal for members of minority groups who have known from experience that a "thicker" and more particularistic language of political life has often worked to marginalize them and, in effect, to brand them as un-American and alien.

This conception of the public square is indeed the conception that Jews and the members of other religious and ethnic minorities have worked so successfully, since the Second World War, to realize in America. Knowing all too well that the public appeal to religious values has most often, in effect, been an appeal to the religious values of the majority and, as such, has entailed the exclusion and "othering" of religious or ethnic minorities, Jews and other minorities worked the

courts and the organs of national public opinion to promulgate a vision of a thoroughly secular public life. This vision was largely realized by the early 1960's.

According to the second perspective, the *e pluribus unum* of American political life is understood as a product of a political process that presupposes that the polity is riven by a range of differences - economic, regional, ethnic and religious, and that these differences are the raw material from which a political majority -- and hence the *e pluribus unum* -- is to be hewn on an *ad hoc*, issue by issue basis. This composite and complex political majority, which is produced through logrolling, coalition building and compromise, stands for the whole and claims for itself the mantle of democratic legitimacy even when it commands the slimmest majority. The *unum* in this case is not the essential (or metaphysical) *unum* we considered in the previous case -- an *unum* that goes all the way down, as it were -- but a practical *unum* of common interest that is built up from, and in no way negates, the real differences that differentiate one group or section or interest from another. The *unum*, in other words, is contingent and *ad hoc*. It is pragmatic and of the moment. It is an *unum* born of intersecting interests, not an *unum* born of deeper or more far ranging commonality.

From this perspective, religious differences are regarded as a legitimate object of partisan political appeals that, in political terms, do not differ from political appeals that are made on the basis of other cleavages in the body politic. Politics, here, is understood as interest-group politics and the members of particular religious or denominational groupings are regarded as having particular interests in common that are proper grist for the political mill. Political appeals to religious differences are from this perspective not unlike political appeals that presuppose differences in regional or industry-specific economic interests or differences in the interests of ethnic groups.

The danger of such a politics is that the political majority that carries the day - whether narrow or wide - need not be concerned with the interests, or rights, of the political (and/or religious) minority. Thus a white majority might use its power to disadvantage non-whites, or a Christian coalition might act to disadvantage non-Christians. Unlike the prior approach that, in effect, would privilege the common status of Americans as equal citizens, this approach would privilege the pre-political differences of race, class, culture and religion, and ground politics upon them. As a consequence, there is a real danger that where "difference politics" prevails the *unum* will come to be defined in exclusive and exclusionary terms that marginalize discrete religious, ethnic or racial minorities in psycho-social if not in legal and more practical terms, relegating them to an inferior or subaltern status.

To date, the United States has been spared the worst political consequences of multiculturalism, but it is understandable why the prospect of such a politics

makes many Jews nostalgic for the post-war American ideal of unabashed and unreconstructed liberal universalism. For those who know what it is to be excluded and marginalized (or worse) by a politics that regards narrow ethnic or religious appeals to be legitimate, the dream of the multiculturalist rainbow rings rather hollow. It is understandable, then, that many Jews (and many others besides) recoil in dread at the prospect that appeals to religion - and hence appeals to religious differences as well - might come to play a more prominent role in American political life. It is not hard for them to foresee how this turn might lead to their *de facto* if not *de jure* disenfranchisement, and hard for them to envision the circumstances under which it will not. While Jews were generally proud of the Lieberman nomination, it should come as no surprise then that many Jews were quite wary - indeed far warier than many Christians - of Lieberman's propensity to wear his religion on his sleeve. For Abe Foxman of the ADL, Lieberman's public religiosity was no less discomfiting than George Bush's confession that Jesus Christ is his favorite political philosopher. Indeed, from Foxman's perspective it was much moreso since Jews should especially understand the importance of holding the line against the entry of religion into politics. After all, if it's okay for the Jews to invoke religion, then it must surely be okay for the Christians to do so. And we know where that is likely to lead.

The two approaches to conceiving of the relation between religion and politics that we have canvassed so far are relatively easy to imagine, as they hew rather close to modern experience. What is harder by far to imagine is a third approach that lies between a difference-denying, rather abstract civic universalism and a difference-rich, coalition-oriented, multicultural politics. In this third variant, difference (and religious difference more especially) is neither denied nor regarded as irreducible, but is treated as a singular manifestation of the universal and, as such, is both valorized and transcended at the same time. From this perspective, *e pluribus unum* is to be accomplished by each citizen as she goes back and forth between the community of her cultural origin and the public square in which the thick wisdom traditions of each community of origin are brought forward to speak (where germane) to the most pressing political questions of the day.

It was Hannah Arendt's profound insight that the currency of politics is not truth but opinion, and that the political process is not about securing the truth but about producing a consensus of opinion. In a strange kind of alchemy, that which counts as truth outside of politics becomes just one more opinion as soon as it is enunciated in the political realm. Building on her insight, I would argue that upon entering the political realm, the truth claims of particular religious traditions undergo an important change that is the *sine qua non* of political life in general and more especially of political life in our pluralist and open society. Thus it comes about that religiously grounded claims that are existentially authoritative for an individual, claims that an individual regards as true because they are believed to be revealed, communally sanctioned and/or time tested, are stripped

of this authority when they are offered to the wider political community as pertinent to one or another challenge of our common political existence. In this movement, what was absolutely true for the individual becomes just one political opinion among many and it can only achieve a wider *political* validity if the individual succeeds in persuading his fellow citizens of its cogency and adequacy.

As a matter of civic respect for one's fellow citizens, however, it is incumbent upon the individual citizen to translate his claim into the idiom of secular reason and to forego parochial appeals to his co-religionists even as he proudly acknowledges the particular religious provenance of the claims he is espousing. Expediency alone dictates that members of religious minorities translate their positions into the secular *lingua franca* of the public square if they want the majority to embrace a given position, but in the political culture being envisioned here even citizens who belong to the majority religion would translate their positions into the idiom of secular civic discourse out of a principled commitment to a civic culture in which religious differences do not function as sources of political advantage. In the first approach, this aim was realized by denying religion any legitimate role in public life, which in effect threw out the baby of religious wisdom for fear of the bath of religiously based discrimination, as it were. Here, however, in the articulation of the third approach, a way is sought to save the baby without getting soaking wet in the process. A commitment to the translation of religiously derived claims or arguments into the most widely accessible language expresses a commitment to a broadly inclusive political life that is nourished but not ruined by the wellsprings of religious wisdom.

By this act of translation, the good citizen will ideally manifest a laudable dual loyalty to both his own particular religious tradition and to the wider human community to which he belongs as a citizen. Love of neighbor demands offering to one's community whatever wisdom one possesses that may be of assistance, but it also demands that the offering be conveyed in a manner, and in a language, that can be generally understood and can find acceptance at least potentially. In public life, this means that when what one has to offer is an idea or an opinion as to why x should be done and not y, one must set forth good reasons and good reasons are reasons that have been translated into a secular language of the widest possible accessibility and appeal.

Whoever accepts this orientation toward political life as a matter of principle (or even on pragmatic grounds), and is willing to accept that in political life the common good can only be defined through a process of mutual exchange of opinion that culminates in a consensus as to wherein the common good lies, need not be feared as a danger to our political life. My hunch is that we are living in an era in which more religious people than ever before accept this norm and are willing to abide by it. And that is why I do not fear and, indeed, strongly

support the return of religious energy and enthusiasm to our public life. I also trust in the bulwark of the constitutional separation of church and state as providing enough security to permit the passionate union of religion and politics.

Having benefited politically, socially and economically from an era in which religion was politically marginal, Jews are understandably wary of countenancing the renewed commingling of religion and politics. It is hard for us to imagine how invoking our Jewish faith, history or values in the public square will not “other” us, will not become politically self-defeating and lead us to forfeit everything we have gained since the Emancipation. In reality, however, the wall of separation between religion and politics has become increasingly permeable and the return of religion to public life is ongoing. Just where this process will lead is still an open question. But insofar as we want to influence this process, we should support the emergence of a relationship between religion and politics that will minimize the potential for injury and maximize the potential benefit to our public life.

Of the approaches we have been considering, then, the choice before us comes down to either the second or the third. Of these, which is more likely to be conducive to increased social solidarity and increased resistance to political idolatry - the twin goods that religion can contribute to our public life? Which is less likely to encourage the negative synergies of religious intolerance and discrimination that have so frequently arisen when religion has been permitted entry into the political sphere?

In closing, we might say that politics is all about walls and bridges, about erecting walls and building bridges. At the beginning of the 21st century, we must ask ourselves whether the political manifestation of religious difference, in general, and of Jewishness, in particular, is a wall or a bridge. After millennia in the West in which we experienced our Jewishness as a wall - and after fifty years in America in which muting our public Jewishness proved to be the recipe for social and political inclusion -- it is hard to imagine that it could now be a bridge.

But for religion to play this role, citizens must not be asked to leave their religious identities outside the state house door.
