

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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That great English politician Edmund Burke once commented
on mixing Church and State, and this is what he said:

Politics and the pulpit are terms that have
little agreement. No sound ought to be heard in
the church but the healing voice of Christian charity.
Surely the church is a place where one day's truce
ought to be allowed to the dissensions and animosities
of mankind.

Burke said this in the middle of the French Revolution,
when the pulpits of France were raging with political
rhetoric. But there is a lot of truth to what he said.

During Burke's lifetime, he saw, and approved, the founding
of the United States on the principle of separation of

Church and State. He had great admiration for Americans and for their principles. He defended the American cause on the floor of Parliament in the dark days before the Revolutionary War. There can be no doubt, amid the excesses of the French Revolution, that he thought of America's Constitution, which insisted that there should be no official religion, and considered his American cousins exceedingly wise.

No politician can step into a church pulpit, or address a prayer breakfast, without being aware that he does so as nothing more than a private citizen, and that he had better leave his politics behind.

Politics must stay out of religion. That is one of our most fundamental laws. And when it comes to creed, to

religious law, to the beliefs and customs of one denomination or another, religion had better stay out of politics. The state can establish no religion; neither can any particular religious group force its will on all the people through the laws of the state. That's basic to our Constitution.

But does this mean that we, as religious people, must isolate our sense of right, and keep it locked up in the church? Not at all. Neither the Founding Fathers, nor Edmund Burke, who admired them, would say so. For Burke said this, as well: "A nation without the means of reform is without means of survival." Our ability to reform ourselves does not come out of a vacuum. It comes out of our sense of justice, a sense that we learned, as little children, when we were taught something as simple and as meaningful

as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That is a religious belief, taught by the Bible. Carrying that principle into our law has brought us renewal, and has permitted us to survive as a nation.

I think Reubin Askew, the Governor of Florida, put it very well:

To claim to be a Christian or Jew who loves God and neighbor, and not to take an active part in the formation of just social policies affecting those neighbors, would seem to deny complete fulfillment of one's faith.

No, we need not, and should not, cut ourselves from our religion in the working-out of our social problems.

While we cannot follow the letter of religious law in writing public law, yet we can follow its spirit.

The spirit of religion is our greatest resource.

When we have had to pass through the valley of the shadow,
as a nation, it is the spirit of religion which has always
sustained our leaders and uplifted our people.

During the worst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln
was listening to the tale of woe told by a delegation to
the White House. They were all wringing their hands and
making long lists of the terrible crises facing the divided
nation. Lincoln told them this story:

Years ago a young friend and I were out one
night when a shower of meteors fell from the clear
November sky. The young man was frightened, but
I told him to look up in the sky past the shooting
stars to the fixed stars beyond, shining serene in
the firmament, and I said, "Let us not mind the meteors,
but let us keep our eyes on the stars."

That is what we all must do in the darkness, when the

sky seems to be falling -- turn our eyes to God's miraculous heavens, and be reassured that there is a law greater than our conflict, and a power greater than our weakness.

That was one of Jesus' last messages to us. On the Cross, in the worst moment of His crucifixion, he momentarily lost faith that God was with him, and cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Christ's whole life was a message from God to Man, and there was a message in this, too. Here was God made flesh. Here was a worker of miracles, a man of such power as no human had ever beheld. In the end, when he was beaten and dying, and thought for a moment that even God had forgotten him, people couldn't believe it. He had such power, they said, why does he not smite his enemies and deliver himself?

But that was not the point. The point was that God himself understands our suffering, even our doubt. Jesus Himself suffered it all, including human despair. But that was only half the message. Seeing Jesus powerless and full of doubt, the people mocked Him. One of the thieves crucified with Jesus challenged him, saying, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us."

Like everybody else, the thief missed part of the message. The message was that worldly power was vain. Faith, in the worst of times, is what is needed, not power. But the other thief realized this, and proved it by saying "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

And the faith of Jesus Himself was restored. He told the thief, "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be

with me in paradise." In that moment, Jesus' experience of human doubt passed into belief, and the circle was complete. He cried in a loud voice, for all to hear, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And he gave up the ghost.

Just a few days later, the other half of God's message to man was revealed, as Jesus stood reborn before his own doubting, disbelieving followers. He appeared to them, transfigured by glory, the truth that faith overcomes despair shining all about him.

With that witness, can we not have faith in ourselves and our nation? And can it not inspire us to get to work in this world the short time we are here?

A man met Billy Graham on the street one day, and began

to tell him of his despair over the sad state of the world.

Finally, he said, "I tell you, Dr. Graham, it's enough to make a man lose his religion." And after a moment, Graham replied, "Rather it seems to me, it's enough to make a man use his religion."

On this occasion, I think it is well to remember my friend Hubert Humphrey. Here was a man who suffered much, who was villified during the Vietnam War, who had more frustration in his career than he deserved. He went through a terrible siege of cancer, and medical treatment so harsh he called it "bottled death." Yet his optimism and buoyancy were undiminished even while his body was wasting away. Whenever he strode onto the floor of the Senate to speak, everyone wanted to listen, even his opponents. His fellow

Senators may have disagreed with his politics, but we were all uplifted by his hope and good cheer.

I met a man who befriended Hubert during his last years -- Dr. Robert H. Schuller, the minister who gave the Senator's funeral sermon. I can see why they were attracted to each other, for both of them made their witness for optimism. Dr. Schuller came to the Senate recently to speak at our weekly prayer breakfast.

This man grew up on a farm in Iowa during the Depression, and he learned how to be optimistic from his father. Their farm was devastated by the dust bowl drought, and it was destroyed again by a tornado. Yet his father clung to his optimism and it fueled his life with energy to struggle back.

As Dr. Schuller said of his father, "He taught me that it's almost impossible to be a loser unless you think and accept a losing mentality. He had faith in the Lord and in nature itself. The sun is going to rise tomorrow; the sun is rising somewhere right now. This very minute there's a sunrise somewhere."

My friends, I am tired of negativism in our public life. We will always have it to some degree. It is part and parcel of our self-critical nature, and some of it is good. But we can drown in it if we let ourselves.

America is the wonder of the earth. We are not a decrepit, worn-out society. We are not corrupt, as the Russians used to say, nor are we the paper tigers the Chinese used to call us. The American experiment which began in

the days of Edmund Burke is still alive, and a lot less experimental. We have proved ourselves in every avenue of statecraft. We have a legal system to adjust the conflicts among men, and a political process which resolves policy disputes with more success than any of the nations of the world. Our business is fundamentally strong, our people fundamentally sound in their aims, values, and abilities.

We loose sight of the magnificence of America because we are too close to her. I spoke to an ambassador from the Middle East the other day, about the problem we have with excessive imports and the fact that these are undermining the value of our currency. I asked him if the OPEC nations would stop using the dollar to set the worldwide price of oil, which would have the effect of raising the price for

the United States.

The ambassador made me turn around and look at my own country. He said that from the point of view of the Middle Eastern states, which have known nothing but poverty for ages and ages, the United States is an economic miracle. He told me our industry has such long-term strength that we should look upon the dollar's present difficulties as nothing more than a temporary problem. America's economic resources are too great for our standing to be diminished for very long.

Of course we have problems. We must have a comprehensive energy policy, and I believe we shall have it. We must reform our federal government's spending practices and return it to a sound fiscal basis that does not include endless

borrowing of money, and the mortgaging of our children's futures to pay for our present needs and our excesses.

I believe we shall do it, as soon as the public's will is firm.

We have our crises, but we always have. We have seen war, depression and hunger, social crisis and governmental crisis, and we have always come through. We have come through when things looked a lot blacker than they do now.

To echo Dr. Schuller's words, we will not be losers unless we accept the idea that we are, and as I read the American people, we are a long way from making that mistake. We have too many blessings to think we are at the end of our rope, and too much stubborn spunk to give up even if we were. We have the means to reform ourselves, and

therefore we have the means for survival.

But let me say no more about these issues of the day.

Edmund Burke would accuse me of bringing the strife of

our political life into the pulpit, where it has no

business being. That is not my intention. I look to the

prayer breakfasts I attend in the Senate for spiritual

refreshment, not for more Senate debate. My purpose in

mentioning these things come from my feeling that we must

heed the message of religion in all our walks of life.

That message is that there is reason to hope and be con-

fident; that we have many blessings to count, along with our

frustrations; that justice and peace among men are possible;

that the just man is not alone in the world or abandoned

by God here or in eternity.

Religion is like a well of peace and understanding. But if a man does not go and sit by the well, and drink often of its waters, it is useless to him. We have to practice what we believe every day of our lives. Too many people seem to feel that religion is a matter for the experts, that it is something for the ministers and theologians to tend to. But we should not think that. If we leave religion to the theologians, we make it nothing more than a course of intellectual study. We, the laity, must study it, and study to make it central to all we do.

There is balm in religion for all our hurts. There are solutions for all our difficulties, public and private. And, there is everywhere in the thousands of years of religious experience, cause for our unshakeable optimism.

The Lord often rebuked his followers for losing their faith and hope. Remember the storm at sea, in which His disciples thought all was lost.

And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full.

And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awaked him and said unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?

And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?

The secret of our faith is hope. It is hope that rebukes the wind, and calms the raging sea. It brings us peace, in the middle of the storm. And hope gives us what we need to carry on when we think we are about done for.

Let me close with an anecdote about not giving up.

(ZUP-key)

When Bob Zuppke was coaching the Illinois football

team some years ago, he was famous for making fiery speeches to the squad before the game. At one point, he had a young inexperienced team of sophomores, who were going to play a very powerful Iowa team, their arch-rivals. Illinois didn't have much of a chance, so the coach really poured it on before the game.

"This is the supreme test, men!" he shouted. "Steel yourselves for your greatest effort! Get out there and be ready to die for Illinois. There'll be no one taken out of the game unless he's dead!"

The team surged onto the field and played themselves into the ground trying to stop the better team. Late in the game, there was one more tremendous crash, and when the

dust cleared, there was an Illinois player lying on the ground as still as he could be.

The coach turned to a sophomore bench-warmer and said "All right, you! Go in there and replace that man!" The substitute gulped, and then ran onto the field. He looked down at the fallen warrior, and then came trotting back to the sidelines. And coach Zuppke just exploded. He yelled at the boy, "Get back in there and take that man's place."

But the sophomore said confidently, "It ain't necessary, coach. He's still breathin' a little."

People think we're done for, from time to time. But let me assure you America isn't dead yet. We're still breathing just a little bit.