

Some Reflections on Faith and Politics
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(2/17/03)

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning and to share some reflections on my own pathway, faith and politics. Specifically I will focus on the moral understanding, moral capacity, and moral claims making that faith communities can contribute in moving toward the realization of 3 core values of equality, community, and democracy.

Like most of us, I've gained my perspective as a result of my experience - how I grew up, my work as an organizer, and my work as a teacher.

Moral Understanding

I grew up in a religious family. My father was a Rabbi, my mother a teacher. My father served as a chaplain in World War II and I lived three of my very early years, 1946 to 1949, in Germany, where my father worked with Holocaust Survivors. In my home, the Holocaust was interpreted at Passover Seders, as a consequence of racism, as evidence of the fact that the struggle for freedom was continuing, and expressive of the view that the world is an arena in which we are expected to enact a moral vision. I was always struck by the part of the Seder in which it is said "God delivered you from slavery to freedom" - not some people in some ancient past, but you. As a child I found this difficult to understand. . .and perhaps spent many years figuring out it meant the struggle itself goes on, each generation having to reenact it.

Most of us - whether we practice or not - directly or indirectly - acquired our moral understanding of the world we live in - who are community is, what our obligations are, what is right action - through our faith traditions.

American political culture has relied on Judeo-Christian religious traditions as the ground of our democratic practice and politics. To be sure, our tradition is also rooted in civic ideas which go back to the Greeks, but which often got to us through religious institutions as well. We have never developed a muscular secular political morality, especially when it comes to common interests. At the same time however, our political institutions are almost unique in the developed world in the degree of religious pluralism they facilitated, resulting in a vigorous religious life. As a result, at times of crisis it is to our religious traditions that we have returned for an understanding of what we should do - the Abolitionist movement, the Civil War, late 19th century agrarian struggles, the Civil Rights movement, resistance to the war in Viet Nam -- and the powerful moral claims of the new conservative movement.

Moral Capacity

I came to Harvard in 1960 as an undergraduate, but dropped out before graduating in 1964, to volunteer for the Mississippi Summer Project. As for many, for me the choice to get involved was not so much political, as moral. The question not so much of right and wrong, but of acting on what we knew to be right. In this I was particularly inspired by the courage of the young people who led much of the civil rights movement - not only the 27 year old Dr. King who led the Montgomery bus boycott, but the 17, 18, and 19 year-olds who did the sit-ins, the freedom rides, and so much else. And it was through this choice that I was to discover my vocation for the next 28 years, that of organizing.

I had rarely been in a church before going to Mississippi, having read selections from the New Testament for the first time in my introductory philosophy course at Harvard. Going from that to Pilgrim's Rest Baptist Church in Chula, Mississippi was an education, indeed. And I quickly learned the critical role of the church in nurturing this movement that was to transform America. We were welcomed in the church hall, housed in the homes of deacons, worked with people who learned to be leaders in their congregations, interpreted our cause at Wednesday night prayer meetings, and we spoke at many an anniversary Sunday. At one point I was even recruited to teach Baptist Sunday School at Sweet Home Baptist Church, about one mile from the Louisiana border. Although what knowledge I had of the Hebrew Bible stood me in good stead, I don't think it's what my father had in mind.

It was here I learned to see the church not only as a source of "understanding" about what was right - but also as a source of the solidarity, willingness to sacrifice, anger at injustice, and courage, and leadership to take action - in other words, not only of moral "understanding" but the capacity to act on that

understanding. Or, as St. Augustine said, not only of "knowing the good", but also of "loving it" enough to act on it.

Again, in the American political tradition, churches not only influenced our understanding of right and wrong, but our capacity to act on that understanding. The leadership, organization, meeting places, for the Temperance Movement, Abolitionist movement, Suffrage movement, the Populist movement, and Labor movement - - much of it came from the churches. In my study of the Knights of Labor I learned of many a union organizer who started out in a seminary - or as the child of a minister. This is no accident. Nor is it an accident that the early civil rights movement first recruited through campus Christian organizations. And in the US, when it comes to politics, the institution that has the greatest impact on working class participation is not unions as in the rest of the developed world, but churches.

Moral Claims

After leaving the South in late 1965, I returned home to Bakersfield, California, where, just 30 miles away, in Delano, Cesar Chavez had begun a grape strike. Although I'd grown up in Bakersfield, it took my experience in Mississippi to give me the eyes to see the farm worker world around me - Mississippi eyes. Many of us went to Mississippi thinking its racism an exception to America, but after experiencing the reality, came to see it as an example of America. It was only after I came back from Mississippi that I saw the agricultural fields all around me, noticed who was working in them, and realized the power inequality that was responsible. So I began to work with Cesar -- for the next 16 years - and was introduced to yet another religious tradition, that of Mexican Catholicism. As in the South, this tradition was a source of solidarity, courage, willingness to sacrifice and leadership.

In this case the church not only fueled the movement directly, but - Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish - became a bridge to people of good will throughout the country, interpreting the cause of the farm workers as a moral one, translating the struggle for union recognition into the struggle for dignity, which it really was. The California Migrant Ministry brought delegation after delegation to Delano to "educate" its leadership about farm worker conditions so they could go back home and interpret this to their congregations. At the height of the Grape Boycott, it was the Boston Board of Rabbis which first declared struck grapes "nonkosher." The doctrine of "oshek" meant the fruit of exploited labor was "unclean." And it was a committee of the US Catholic Conference led by Bishop Joseph Donnelly of New Haven that ultimately mediated the dispute with the growers. The successes of the UFW would simply not have happened without the strong and compassionate arms of the churches to help.

Again, it is in the American political tradition for religious institutions not only to serve those in need, but to make claims on behalf of those in need, it is one not only charity, but also of justice, not only of service, but also of prophecy.

Returning to School

I left the farmworkers in 1981, did another 10 years of union, issue, and electoral organizing, mostly in California, and then was invited to my 25th reunion at Harvard. For some time, I'd been trying to find ways to read, reflect, and recontextualize the work I had been doing. So at the end of that week, I realized one way I might be able to do it is to come back and finish the senior year I never finished. I talked to one of the deans, he agreed, and so in the fall of 1991 my wife Susan and I returned to Cambridge. I wrote my senior thesis in history and government (for which I'd already done the research), and graduated class of 1964-92. Finding myself "hooked", I continued the next year at the Kennedy School midcareer program and then decided to do a doctorate in Sociology, which I finished last year. At the same time, the Kennedy School asked me to teach a course on organizing. It provided an opportunity to integrate my life experience, with my academic learning in a kind of cross-generational work - not to say "recruiting" - that I think of as having a conversation with the future. So let me share some reflections on the role of faith traditions not only in the past, but also in shaping that future.

A New Social Gospel

In the late 19th century, one powerful current of American political thought was that of social Darwinism - those that have more, have more because they deserve it -- and it's in all our best interests that they do. A religious response was that of social gospel. As my friend Richard Parker argues, today we are in

the grip of a new social Darwinism, in response to which we need a new social gospel. Let me suggest what 3 elements of that gospel might be.

Moral Understanding of Equality

For our first 150 years, moral philosopher Michael Sandel and others have documented how our politics focused on the question, "What kind of economy facilitates democracy?" It was widely held that extremes of wealth and poverty created a dependency and domination that was incompatible with a democratic polity. Until the 1960s, we made progress on economic inequality. But, after the Civil War, we ignored the racial and gender inequality that grew beside it. Since the 1960s we have made progress on racial and gender equality, but gone backwards on economic equality. So we have greater inequality today than at any time in this century, and it's getting worse -- cutting, of course, far more sharply again the very racial, gender and ethnic groups that were excluded before. We can't solve the problem of racial and gender inequality, without addressing economic inequality; just as we could not solve the problem of economic inequality, without addressing the question of racial and gender inequality. What does this have to do with faith?

While our political leaders seem unwilling to address this question, religious traditions based on a belief in the dignity of the human person demand it. From Genesis forward, being created in the likeness of God means that each of us is both unique AND of infinite worth. Of equal and infinite worth. It was this view that led the US Catholic Bishops almost 20 years ago to argue that the "economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy. . . that the dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured. Wherever our economic arrangements fail to conform to the demands of human dignity lived in community, they must be questioned and transformed." If an understanding of what's wrong with inequality- and the demands of economic justice - is to grow anywhere, it will be from within communities of faith.

Moral Capacity through Community

Understanding, and even compassion, is not enough. As Paul Tillich taught us, love cannot be separated from justice, and justice requires the use of power - the capacity to act. Churches have a unique capacity to act because they are moral communities. First, they are where the people are. Despite ongoing concern about declining church attendance, churches remain the places you can find the most people other than sporting events. Second, churches are one of the few major institutions whose resources are rooted in something other than economic value. This puts them in a uniquely powerful position to make claims on the economic system, rather than act solely as a captive of it. Third, at a time in which we have grown deeply distrustful of democratic governance, turning increasingly toward market processes that reduce collective social choices to individual consumer choices, churches are one of the few venues in which we still engage in genuine public deliberation. And, finally, the traditions in which they are rooted are still capable of moving us to commit to - and to risk - action. Increasingly too, faith communities have become the venues in which we are grappling with forging a "strong" pluralism, rooted in respect for each other's identities, rather than a false universalism that denies the moral force of our identities.

Moral Claims to Renew Democracy

As the author of Proverbs (28:15) wrote "where there is no vision the people perish." Those in public life have lost the sense of "vision" which can move us to address the challenges we face. Vision is rooted in moral commitment, and the courage to act on moral commitments is rooted in faith or hope, which is one reason why communities of faith have been central to so many movements of social transformation. The integrity to make moral claims -- and not to be co-opted by an administration that wants to turn them into social service providers -- is why churches remain the most trusted institutions in America.

Political leaders thinking in terms of the next election, the marginal voter, and the millions of dollars they must raise to campaign -- are not about to assert the kind of vision which will move us to act - especially make claims on the very institutions on which they must rely for their reelection. This is especially true when convinced politics is only about "self-interest", nothing more and nothing less. So instead of a politics of contention over the major issues of the day, we are reduced to the trivial politics of personality and

partisanship for its own sake. Our hope for a renewal of a commitment to democracy and its promise will come from those with the courage to make strong public claims. And where will that come from, if not from communities of faith? Up to now the claims of faith that has been publicly made are largely on the right. Isn't it time for another voice, another set of claims to be heard? But not only as pronouncements of national church bodies, but also as part and parcel of daily parish life.

Learning to Be David

How can we do what is required of us? For some help with this we turn to the Book of Samuel, Chapter 17, Verses 4-49, the story of David and Goliath.

How does the story begin?

When Goliath, veteran warrior, victor of many battles, arrayed in full battle gear, challenges the Israelites, their military leaders cower in fear. But this is just the prologue.

The story begins with David, the young shepherd boy, at the battle mainly to attend to his brothers.

And what starts the action? When he has figured out a plan to defeat the giant? When he has calculated what is expected of him? When he has sent out to McKinsey for a feasibility study of whether or not it is "practical" for him to take on this giant?

No. It begins when the spirit of the Lord gives him courage. It begins when he decides he must act. It begins with his commitment to what must be done, not its practicality, not how he will do it.

And what happens next?

He tells the king. And what does the king say? The king tells him he's not qualified, he's too young, he doesn't have the experience, hasn't earned the right degrees.

But David insists. Look around you, he says. No one else will fight. So why not me? Finally the King is persuaded, but on one condition. Be careful, says the king, you are but a youth, and he has been a warrior since his youth. So take my sword, take my shield, and take my helmet. These will protect you.

Convinced, David agrees. To fight the powerful, after all, one must use the tools of the powerful.

But then what happens?

On the way into battle, he almost trips over some stones, five smooth stones, that he finds in a wadi at his feet. But the stones get him thinking.

Wait, he thinks. I'm a shepherd, not a warrior. The armor doesn't fit. The sword is too heavy. The helmet is stifling. I don't know how to use these, he says. I've proved them not.

But, he recalls, as a Shepherd I knew how to protect my flock from the wolf, the bear and the lion. And it wasn't with a sword or a shield, but it was with stone like these. Hm....maybe Goliath is just another bear.

At that, he takes off the sword, shield and helmet, picks up the stones, puts them in his pouch, and goes off to face Goliath. Goliath, arrogant in his experience, strength, and pride, sees no problem in this young Shepherd. He laughs. David takes out his stone, he slings it, and, of course, the rest is history.

One's power begins not with the greatness of one's resources, the probability of one's success, but with the depth of one's commitment. No strategic plan for David. The recognition he had to act. That's where it all begins.

Not the king's resources for David, but his own. Our own resources, our own skills - this is where we must look for our power, not to the tools of the powerful. American patriots once found power in tea, Gandhi found power in salt, Chavez's farm workers found power in grapes.

David trusted his imagination. He was an outsider to the field of battle. He didn't know all the taken-for-granted rules by which everything was supposed to work. But as an outsider, a Shepherd among soldiers, he trusted in his experience and saw resources none could see, opportunities none could seize.

Help us learn to be David: faithful enough to trust our own spirit where others do not trust theirs, wise enough to draw on our own experience to see where others do not see, and courageous enough to act on what we do see where others cannot act.