RELIGION AND POLITICS

A sermon preached by David Hughes, of the Oxford Unitarian Congregation,
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Introduction
Those of you who were here in early December may remember Arthur Stewart's address on
the theme of religion and politics. Arthur spoke of the ways in which religion, at its best, has
always been a blend of the personal and the social, and he suggested that good people are
needed to bring in the good society. In the time we now spend together I would like to offer
some of my own thoughts on the relationship between religion and politics and give some
reasons why I think Unitarianism has much to offer in the current political climate.

Part I
In today's society, there exist two powerful yet contradictory ways of thinking about religion
and politics. The first is secularism: it seeks to separate religion from politics, and it treats
religion as a matter for private individuals rather than as a public concern. The opposite
approach is foundationalism: instead of separating religion and politics, it treats religion as
the foundation, or the fundamental basis, of politics. These two ways of thinking –
secularism and foundationalism – have profound consequences for the world in which we
live. Allow me to explain each one in more detail.

The first perspective – secularism – is a product of the Western Enlightenment. In
the wake of the religious wars that ravaged Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries, Church and State were made separate. No longer would religious difference –
principally that between Catholics and Protestants – be allowed to result in war and
bloodshed. Instead, religion became a matter for private individuals rather than states:
rulers were no longer able determine the religious denominations of their subjects, and
wars were fought over territory or ideology rather than religion. Reason rather than religion
was to guide politics.

Secularism remains a powerful force in world politics today. Many people believe
that as societies become more modern they become less religious. In part, this idea stems
from falling levels of church attendance and religious belief in Europe since the mid
twentieth-century, a time when learned academics made bold predictions that religion
would all but disappear by the year 2000. Of course, this has not come to pass, but a milder
version of secularism still underwrites a good deal of contemporary politics. There are many
commentators, for instance, who believe that people of different religions can lively
peacefully together provided they respect liberal democratic institutions and keep religion
out of politics.

The opposite perspective – foundationalism – treats religion as the foundation of
politics. On this view, politics only works if an underlying set of shared cultural and religious
values exists to bind the community together. Normally associated with conservatism, this
viewpoint reminds us that the Enlightenment did not diminish peoples’ need to belong to a
particular community; it simply meant that people came to identify predominantly with the
nation rather than with the Church, and that a large part of national identity remained
rooted in religious tradition.

One only has to recall David Cameron’s comments last month about Britain being a
Christian nation that should follow Christian values to see that the foundationalist
perspective is alive and well. Despite Britain being one of the least religious nations on earth in terms of church attendance or individuals' willingness to profess some kind of religious faith, our conservative Prime Minister still insists on emphasizing the nation's Christian heritage. On the international stage, one sees foundationalism at work in incendiary rhetoric about a "clash of civilizations." That rhetoric implies that religious differences cannot be bridged and will form the underlying basis of conflict in the twenty-first century. The problem of Islamic fundamentalism in the last decade has exaggerated the appeal of this theory to some, as has the resurgence of religion in most parts of the world apart from Western Europe.

Part II

Two viewpoints, then, dominate contemporary thinking about religion and politics: secularism and foundationalism. Yet, both viewpoints seem to me to be problematic.

Beginning with secularism, the Enlightenment may have separated Church and State, but this is not the same as separating religion and politics. In fact, separating different spheres of authority does not stop religious ideas from influencing politics, or vice-versa. An excellent example of this can be seen in the United States. The American Declaration of Independence contains four references to God, and the American Constitution is based on the biblical covenant tradition. Providential ideas about "manifest destiny" were invoked to justify the annexation of Texas. During the American civil war, Abraham Lincoln saw the death of Union soldiers as sanctifying the founding principles of a single nation under God. In the twentieth century, G. K. Chesterton described the United States as "a nation with the soul of a church" and coined the idea of an "American Creed" – a set of values to which men may convert rather than be born into. Religion and politics in the United States, then, have always been inseparable.

In some ways, the religious aspects of American politics have become problematic in recent times. The collapse of communism has been taken by many to imply that American values such as liberal democracy, free markets, and private ownership are beyond question. In that respect, the American Creed has become gospel, and to question it is akin to heresy. This is one reason why the so-called "Washington Consensus" – a set of economic policy prescriptions meted out to poorer countries by the IMF and World Bank – is enforced with a kind of religious zeal despite its overtly detrimental effects in many regions. Meanwhile, American military intervention in foreign countries sometimes bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the Crusades of the Middle Ages, especially when ordered by self-righteous leaders who claim to be upholding good against evil. So not only does religion influence politics, it is far from clear that its influence is necessarily benign.

Should we, therefore, take the opposite point of view: that religion forms the foundation of politics? Certainly not. For although religion can and does influence politics, the reverse is also true: politics can and does impact upon religion. One only has to consider the Protestant Reformation to see the ways in which political factors, such as the desire of princes to gain autonomy from the Pope, reshaped the religious landscape in Europe. Religion, that is, is not prior to politics; rather, each affects the other.

Foundationalist rhetoric about a "clash of civilizations" proves dangerously wide of the mark. By depicting Islam as fundamentally irreconcilable with Western secularism, that rhetoric serves only to inflame pre-existing tensions and to render impossible the idea of peaceful interaction between the West and Islam. In actual fact, it is far from clear that Islam is incompatible with secularism – just recall our earlier reading: "Whatever the
Prophet has said in matters of religion must be followed, but this does not apply to worldly affairs.” How different is this really from Christ’s injunction to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s”? Both Jesus and Muhammad recognized the importance of secular law as a means of overcoming tribal feuding; both wanted peace, and neither sought to force his views on others. The Koran is indeed clear that there is to be “no compulsion in religion.” The idea of a “clash of civilizations” is, therefore, a grotesque caricature that projects contemporary forms of prejudice and intolerance onto religion. We should not give it any credence.

Part III
You may be wondering where all this leaves us. So allow me to recap. Two ways of understanding the relationship of religion and politics dominate in contemporary society, namely secularism and foundationalism. Secularism seeks to deny the influence of religion on politics by relegating religion to the private sphere. Foundationalism portrays religion as the necessary precondition of politics. Both perspectives, however, are misleading. Secularism is misleading because religion does influence politics whether we like it or not – a fact that is well illustrated by the overtly religious aspects of American politics. Foundationalism is misleading because religion does not come before politics, and because different faiths need not be antagonistic.

Most Unitarians would have no difficulty in rejecting the foundationalist approach, divisive and intolerant as it is. On the other hand, however, many Unitarians would identify with secularism as a means of allowing people of different faiths to live peacefully side by side. Obviously there is a great deal of merit in this, for secularism has helped to quell sectarian violence in many places around the world, and I for one find secularism entirely compatible with the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad, as well as many other prophets who have espoused peace and neighbourly love. That said, however, I do think that we need to be careful about reducing religion to a matter for private individuals.

Society is more than the sum of its parts, and politics is more than the sum of individual actions and choices. It is all very well placing the emphasis on individual freedom of conscience, as Unitarians rightly do, but this should not blind us to the fact that religion is not just something that private individuals or groups do on their own. As we heard in the reading by Jessica Rodela, “That we employ separation of church and state is a necessary social evolution for a pluralistic community; but it does not negate the fact that religion is political. To separate religion from politics renders religion irrelevant and politics lethal.” I think many of us would agree that religion risks becoming irrelevant when separated from politics, since, for most of us, faith of whatever kind carries with it an imperative to make a positive difference in society. No less important, however, is what becomes of politics when it is separated from religion.

Without some set of higher values to which to appeal, politics threatens to become amoral. Instead of striving to create a more just, peaceful, and equitable society, politics without religion degenerates into little more than the managerial regulation of private capital, or a tool by which powerful interest groups advance their own claims at the expense of others. We see this today in politicians’ failure to rein in the big banks, in the corrupting influence of money on lobbying and electioneering, in the power of spin doctors, and in the willingness of politicians to reinvent their values in order to further their own careers. This is not to say that politicians are bad people; on the contrary, many enter politics with a genuine desire to do good, and many retain that desire throughout their careers. But when
the political system itself lacks a moral compass, then the virtuous intentions of individual politicians are repeatedly undermined.

The idea that religious values can or should influence politics today seems oddly archaic, even dangerous, despite the fact that the financial crisis is widely blamed on the old-fashioned sin of greed and that soaring rates of mental illness in the West have been statistically correlated with the kind of individualistic, materialistic, and highly unequal societies that no great prophet has ever advocated. On the one hand, we lament the seeming lack of moral substance in contemporary politics, but on the other hand, most Unitarians, as secularists, want to keep religion out of politics. The fear is understandable: whose religion should influence politics? Clearly there is a problem with painting Britain as a Christian nation, as Cameron tries to do. For it implies that Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, atheists and other non-Christians cannot really form part of British culture. It is precisely this danger of one religious group imposing its values on others that makes most Unitarians wary of allowing religion into politics.

But consider the alternative. If we stand back and steadfastly pretend that religion has no place in politics, then we make several mistakes. First, we ignore the fact that religion is political, not just in terms of the way in which individual actions can be political, but also in that religion, like politics, aims to build a better society. Second, religion does influence politics whether we like it or not — the religious aspects of American politics being the most obvious example. Third, if religion — or at the very least some set of higher moral values — is removed from politics, then politics becomes increasingly directionless and open to corruption. And finally, if we disavow the role of religion in politics, then we pave the way for those religious groups, such as the Religious Right in America, who do seek to influence the political process for their own ends.

I want to conclude, therefore, with a call to be more positive about the role of religion in politics. Instead of trying to keep religion and politics apart for fear of the political process getting hijacked by dominant religious groups, we should embrace the fact that religion and politics never really were separate and work towards ensuring that the influence of religion on politics is benign. Rather than dwelling on the detrimental effects that religion can have on politics, we should remember the potentially beneficial effects. If world leaders were to follow the Buddha’s ten rules for good government, would the world be a more violent, or a more peaceful place? If British politicians were to pay more attention to Cameron’s advice to follow Christian values, then would such travesties as the expenses scandal, or cash for questions, occur? If the respect that Muhammad demonstrated for other faiths were recognised in mainstream political discourse, rather than the stereotypes of Islam that predominate, then would there be so much antagonism between the West and the Arab world?

Being positive about the role of religion in politics does not imply that we need to base our politics on Scripture. It is not the same as advocating a theocracy, a state religion, or even a committee of religious “experts.” Rather, it is to do what Unitarians do so well: to distil what is best in religion — but then also to strive for its political application. All the world’s great religions have this in common: that they aim for peace and a better society. Despite their different figureheads, rituals, languages and traditions, they all teach such principles as sympathy, compassion, loving-kindness, tolerance, acceptance, respect for one’s environment, and gentleness toward oneself and others. These are not principles that should be kept out of politics; they should be front and centre. Even atheists would be hard
pushed to object to such values, indeed many atheists adopt a humanism that is entirely compatible with them.

So let us not be afraid to demand more from politics. Let us retain a vision of what politics could and should be and not feel awkward about working towards that vision. Let us recognize that whilst secularism is an important device for preventing religious conflict, it does not mean that religion should be, or ever was, entirely separate from politics. Let us not feel that our faith is something that must always be kept private, although we may wish to practise it that way. And above all, while respecting the faiths of others, let us never underestimate our capacity to work together, publicly, for the greater good.

_Amen._