

Do Religion and Politics Mix?

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One of my most critical readers suggested recently that I should stick to religion in my columns and leave politics alone. I've heard this comment before.

I disagree. In my opinion, religion deals with the whole of human life, not just the spiritual side of things. Therefore, it includes all facets of our common life—economic issues, social issues, poverty, homelessness, as well as politics.

To be clear, I understand politics to describe the way in which people agree among themselves to live together in tribes, cities, or countries. Politics is the work of how we make decisions for the common good. I'm not talking about the increasingly dirty business of partisan party politics.

With this understanding, when Jesus commands us to love our neighbours, it is political behaviour of the best kind. We seek the best for all our neighbours without regard for whether they are like us or different than us.

Indeed, as Marcus Borg has pointed out many times, "Jesus' whole message is political. It upends the social structures and calls for radical changes in the ways we live together." The gospel has inspired countless people in the most powerful political movements and initiatives: Martin Luther King, Jr along with John Lewis and the other leaders of the Civil Rights movement; Tommy Douglas, who championed public health care; Gandhi; Indigenous activists working for truth and reconciliation; William Wilberforce who was inspired to work in the British Parliament for an end to the slave trade.

I can't help but wonder why some people want to keep religion and politics separate. I suspect it's because they benefit from the system and don't want anything to change.

To be sure, there are many examples of religion and politics not mixing in beneficial ways: the troubles in northern Ireland; 9/11; the Taliban's brutal government in Afghanistan; the alarming attempt by the Christian right to impose their own personal beliefs regarding abortion, the rights of minority groups including the LGBTQ community, as well as the current debate on medical assistance in dying.

Let me give two ways in which we get the relationship between religion and politics wrong, and one way in which we get it right.

Firstly, we get it wrong when we attempt to impose a form of government in which we consider God to be the supreme civil ruler, and we try to base society's laws on God's laws. This is theocracy, when religion "takes power" and religious leaders seek to impose their version of God's will on the rest of us. This is not just the Taliban and other such groups. It's also happening in North America among social conservatives who claim that Canada and the USA are Christian nations.

Theocracy leads to a religious dictatorship. Every time this has happened in history, it has led to the worst kinds of abuse. It ends up justifying evil acts because they are committed in the name of God.

This was the goal of the Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979. It is also the goal of conservative Christian groups in Canada who operate under the radar in Ottawa, promoting the same kind of mindset. Several political aides have called openly for the establishment of a "Christian theocracy," while websites such as <https://christiangovernance.ca/> promote a theocratic ideal for Canada.

Marci McDonald explores this threat to democracy in her 2010 book, The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada. She exposes those who wish to make Canada a theocracy governed according to Judeo-Christian values.

A second way of getting it wrong is the opposite view, in which people see faith as a private matter with nothing to say about the public sphere. Faith is intended to guide the way in which we act and speak. The letter of James notes that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Jesus calls us to love our neighbours, to actively engage with them, to work together for the well-being of all people and all creatures. That is not a private matter. It is public, political engagement.

In my view, this means we are to get involved, to speak out against injustice, to advocate for those who live on the margins of society: the homeless, those who are bedevilled by addiction, the underemployed and underpaid, people without access to health care or education, and so on. It is entirely legitimate to bring the wisdom of the gospel to bear in a world which is grappling with profound economic, social, and environmental challenges.

Thirdly, we get it right when people of faith participate fully in society on the basis of their Christian values, identity, and vision. They accept the flaws, failures, and limitations of our social and political institutions without compromising their integrity as people of compassion and faith. This engagement is an opportunity to embody the kingdom of God as Jesus proclaimed and modelled it, living with compassion and grace, being welcoming and inclusive, reaching out to the least among us and ensuring that all people are treated with justice, compassion, and love.

Christian faith calls us to engage in the political process. We roll up our sleeves and prepare to work hard in the messy business of public, political life, caring deeply about relationships between people as we seek to live together in peace, working for the common good.

It also means that we refuse to accept a cynical vision of life based on self-interest, selfishness, and greed. Rather, we work for a world in which we build communities characterized by love and mutual interdependence.

Partisan politics can be divisive. We see it on the nightly news.

Responsible political engagement can be a force for unifying communities and bringing people together. I will continue mixing politics and religion. As Great Britain’s former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, said, “There is only one truth in heaven, but there are many truths on earth.”