

Religion, Politics, and the Liberal Tradition

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Bethesda, Maryland

Our Kiplinger speaker next Saturday, E.J. Dionne, was raised as a Roman Catholic in Fall River, a seaport town in South Eastern Massachusetts. I lived for four years in New Bedford, Massachusetts, another seaport town fifteen miles from Fall River, serving as the minister of the Unitarian Church in that city.

Throughout the history of the New Bedford Unitarian Church, its ministers have been moral crusaders, preaching public morality from the pulpit. The Reverend Samuel West, who served the congregation from 1760 until 1803, preached a sermon May 29, 1776 titled “On the Right To Rebel Against Governors.” He said “that tyranny and arbitrary power are utterly inconsistent with and subversive of the very end and design of civil government, and directly contrary to natural law . . .” Rev. West’s sermon was published and widely distributed throughout the Colonies. Copies of it were even sent to King George III. The King responded by issuing a reward for the catching or killing of Rev. West.

Before the Civil War, the Reverend John Weiss was said to have reminded the congregation, in every sermon he gave each Sunday, that slavery was evil. In 1858, after eleven years of anti-slavery sermons, the congregation told Rev. Weiss that it was time for him to serve another congregation.

Following in these footsteps, while I served as minister in New Bedford, I also talked about politics from the pulpit. In 1983 I gave a sermon defending New Bedford’s congressman, Gerry Studds. On the floor of the house Gerry Studds, guilty ten years ago. On the floor of the House

Congressman Studds admitted having sex with a 17 year old House page in 1973 and stated that he was gay. He was the first member of congress in our nation’s history to openly admit that he was homosexual.

The difficult moral issues are those where I can see good and bad on both sides. On the one hand, it was bad that a United States congressman, a person of great status and power, had sexual relations with a 17 year old house page, a person with little status and power. So in my sermon I said that what the congressman had done was wrong. On the other hand, the page appeared publicly with Studds in support of him, saying that it had been a consensual relationship that had harmed no one. I struggled with the issue and decided that forgiveness was appropriate. Today, knowing more about the issue of sexual abuse of young people by adults, I am not sure that I would take the same position. For me it is a difficult issue.

In my sermon back in 1983 I said I forgave Congressman Studds for this inappropriate sexual relationship. I came as close as I could to saying that everyone should vote for Congressman Studds, without actually saying it. I said: “Living in Southeastern Massachusetts I have a special opportunity to help society overcome its prejudice against homosexuality.” And I said: “If an openly gay congressman can be reelected, it will be a very positive step for our society.” Gerry Studds was reelected, and served in Congress until he retired in 1997.

The congregation’s reaction to the sermon I gave in 1983 was not universally positive. At the time I was asking the congregation of about one hundred and thirty adults to set goals for the church and the number one goal was a reaction to my sermon. Seventeen people voted that their goal for the church in the future was:

To have services that give one an uplifted feeling through continued excellent music and more positive sermons with less emphasis on the many negative social and political problems of which we are already very much aware. We need spiritual refreshing for an hour on Sunday to give us the strength to go out in the world to make it a better place.

My first thought was: “Having this goal setting was a dumb idea on my part. I will not do this again!”

The goal from a member of the congregation highlighted the dilemma of religion, politics and the liberal tradition. On the one hand, going back to the Jewish prophets, religious leaders have preach about political issues.

On the other hand, nearly everyone who comes to church on Sunday morning is carrying heavy burdens. When my sister was dying of cancer three years ago, politics faded in importance as I tried to make sure she had enough morphine to take care of her pain. From time to time all of you struggle with similar personal problems. As the writer of the goal said, “We need spiritual refreshing for an hour on Sunday to give us the strength to go out in the world to make it a better place.”

Most of us in the ministry try to do both. We do our best not to shy away from the moral issues of our time, we talk about social and political problems. At the same time we offer a testimony to hope. We affirm each Sunday that life is worth the struggle, that each of you is a good person, that the earth is beautiful, and that we can have great hope for the future.

This is a difficulty that we clergy face as we struggle with religion, politics and the liberal tradition. Some people on some Sundays find political talk about war, poverty, abortion, or homosexuality depressing. Because of where they are in their lives this is not what they need to hear about on a particular Sunday. For other people however, this is exactly what they may need to hear that day and they leave church feeling spiritual renewed. What is one person’s negative social and political sermon may give another person renewed spiritual strength.

A few years after my sermon in support of the gay congressman, I was leaving New Bedford to accept to serve a church near Chicago. One day a personal letter arrived from the congressman thanking me for my support. “If I cannot convince you to stay, let me at least offer you my thanks and best wishes,” wrote the congressman. I thought of the thank you letter when I heard that Gerry Studds died in Boston on October 14, at the age 69.

Ultimately for me spirituality and politics merge. Religion is about learning to love each other and learning to love the earth. Moral politics and moral spiritual renewal are both about love. Ethical politics is simply the radical application of the golden rule to political decisions. Spiritual renewal in church is simply remembering and feeling that we are loved—and that we have the power inside ourselves to love.

What is the purpose of liberal religion, whether in Fall River or New Bedford or Bethesda?

- To turn loneliness into community.
- To turn despair into hope.
- To turn hate into love.

This is religion. It is politics. It is the liberal tradition. In the words of Jesus, who sent his own people out from a comfortable piety to wrestle with the politics of the day:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be you therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves. (Matthew 10:16 KJV)¹

¹ Biblical commentators say that this may have been common advice in the early Christian movement. The image of lambs being threatened by wolves was suggested of course by a common pastoral scene, lambs being taken out to pasture among wolves or wolves invading a herd of sheep. “As wise as a serpent” would be better translated as “shy as a snake” suggesting shrewdness. Involves a paradox, adopting the posture of both snake and the Dove at the same time. This passage is adopted as the slogan and symbol of Unitarians in Transylvania.