

The Role of Religion, the Role of Politics- Separating Church and State

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I am thinking a lot about Separation of Church and State these days. I don't mean the First Amendment guarantee that Congress shall do nothing to establish a religion for the state, nor interfere in the free exercise of religious practice. But as I look back at the arc of religious and political life in the last 4 decades, it is startling how we have begun to conflate the institution of politics with the institution of religion. It is as if politics, itself, has become the newest American religion. And it doesn't appear that this is a good thing, for either politics or religion.

Now, I am a big fan of religion- Judaism in particular, but religion in general. Religions are about deepening our belief in God and acting in ways that express care for our neighbor. Am I my brother's keeper? (The answer is yes.) Feed the hungry, clothe the naked; the Holiness Code from Leviticus 19 that we read on Yom Kippur afternoon is all about caring for the most at-risk in our community. Religions give us a common language and sacred inspiration to create a community of like-minded people, who share a common outlook. And the truth is, that same aspect of religion-- not the spiritual belief in God, but the caring for others-- is what Politics, at its best, is about. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher of the 4th century BCE, describes politics as the forum for bringing about the "virtuous life in the citizenry", in other words, the stage where we play out our best ideals. So, Religion and politics both, by definition, are vehicles for creating a caring, thriving community.

But, have Politics become the New Religion? From the moment the nightly news gave way to cable news, and cable news became a full day's offering of politics-as-entertainment, politics has grabbed an outsized role in daily life. And with the advent of social media, we can follow and organize and respond emotionally, aggressively, and uncensored, to our political world. If religion is what consumes us for an hour on Sunday mornings or Friday nights, politics, with a 24/7 news cycle, is winning at gathering more of our attention.

Here is where religion and politics differ. In traditional religions, there is an ideology that is inflexible, to which all adherents believe. *Judaism's ideology is that there is one God. If you want to believe in more gods, you can, but you are not Jewish.* Traditional religions speak in the language of what is right and wrong, what is good and what is sinful. *That is what we are doing this week, examining our good behavior and our shortcomings, reminding ourselves of what our actions should be.* And religious ideology speaks in the language of *us vs. them*. At its best, this "in-group mindset" gives us a sense of identity, *(for us, we speak of Jewish peoplehood); but at its worst, in fundamentalist faiths, this "us vs. them mindset" defines others as heretics, not to intermarry or mix with. You might recall that there were denominations that would not participate in interfaith services of solidarity after 9/11. For these religions, there is no compromising of belief, no flexibility- it is wrong to pray with people of other faiths. And they hold onto ideology with a modern-day zealotry.*

Politics, though, is designed to be different. In the 1867 words of Otto von Bismarck, “Politics is the **art of the possible**, the attainable – the **art** of the next best.” If politics is an art, then by nature it is about creativity, about flexibility, compromise, give and take. While each person may have their vision of that caring, thriving community, there is an understanding that I must work with others of different beliefs for the common good. I may not get what I want this time, but there is a commitment to dialogue and the hope that next election, next bill, I can move my agenda forward.

But in our lifetimes, we have seen this dichotomy change. In the 1980’s the Moral Majority was the bridge that brought behaviors of religious ideology fully into politics. We were no longer just Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, but the “other” who was painted as evil. Social issues became moral issues, and therefore non-negotiable. Political disagreement enlarged to be rejection of the “other” by asserting that their beliefs were immoral. Now placed in the realm of religious mindset, there could be no compromise- it was, in fact “virtuous Christian behavior” to shut down the government for your beliefs. Politics was no longer lauded for compromise and progress. It had become “stand your ground” territory. And this approach to politics has been buoyed by the growth of fundamentalist churches, and a move toward more orthodox ideology in mainstream Christian churches. Now, a politician who reaches across the aisle is seen as a traitor. This same “no compromise” now hamstring politicians of all faiths and no faith, on every side of the aisle.

And how has that that mudding the distinction between religious behavior and political behavior affected non-fundamentalist denominations, like Reform Judaism?

Political activism has been as popular in non-fundamentalist faiths as it has been in fundamentalist religions. Eighty years ago, no one spoke of tikkun olam. Now, it is an organizing principle for many Jews in expressing their Jewish identity. Jews in the 1960s learned how to organize from watching civil rights leaders. Our own Religious Action Center was born in those years, proud that the Voting Rights Act was signed in their conference room. Synagogues became the place where Marches to Free Soviet Jewry began. There has been no turning back. Tikkun Olam is how we express our aspirations for the world. Our rabbis of old teach that Judaism, more than a religion of creed, is a religion of deed, our actions matter. The Talmud says that we should build our sanctuaries with windows, so that we are reminded to bring the values we espouse in prayer out into the world. The great Orthodox Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching in Selma, famously wrote, “When I marched in Selma, I felt my feet were praying.” From women’s rights to gay rights, to immigrant rights, civil rights and human rights, tikkun olam defines Jewishness for so many of us in the 21st century.

There IS a place for our religious teachings to infuse the way we shape the political nature of this country. But we must restore an understanding of the role of religion, and the role of politics. The Political world can be where we advocate for our beliefs on social issues, acknowledging that we often come to those beliefs because of our religious teachings. But politics cannot be held hostage to religious belief—that is exactly what the spirit of separation of church and state is about- no one faith coerces their belief on American society. And politics

cannot be held hostage to religious fundamentalist *behavior*- casting our opponents as morally inferior who are to be defeated, as the sons of light over the sons of darkness. We must restore common meeting ground, where politics can function as the seat of the broadest principles of morality, but not the seat of one particular morality. When we advocate for our religious beliefs to take priority over our democratic beliefs, our political system falls apart. We liberal Jews may rightfully be proud of our social activism and the sense that we are walking in the footsteps of our biblical prophets, but we do so with the very clear understanding that we are seeking to *influence* the political stage, *not co-opt* a political process. We might fight forcefully for what we morally believe, but we are certainly not working to change the nature of politics from a free marketplace where ideas are debated to an institution that functions in the style of religious extremism. We are not working to impose our ideology at the expense of democratic ideals, imagining politics as a zero-sum game. We are already seeing the detrimental effect on our political system, which is so mired in ideological functioning that it is becoming ineffective. It is no longer a place where we come together as one citizenry, but now a place of moral sparring, cloaked in our tribal outfits.

It is time we restore our productive political life. It is time to separate the fundamentalist mindset of religion so that politics can function again. We need this for our religious life, too. Politics and religion do not serve the same purpose. But we need the lessons of our religious faith to strengthen us in our political work. Where politics may give us a global community of people, we don't know but who might think like us, our religious community calls us to live locally, to know others personally, their needs, their struggles and their joys. Where politics focuses on improving the world about us, our religion focuses on improving our inner world. Only by cultivating our inner life, can we develop our inner traits of patience, of being able to really listen to, and respect others, so we might be effective in the work we wish to do in the world. And while the Political sphere is where we exercise power to manipulate the world around us, our faith strengthens us by cultivating a deep awareness of how much we really are not in charge. Our politics is how we work to improve the condition of the world as it is. But that belief that things are imperfect and need to be improved, also needs the balance that Judaism provides us to pause from our discontent and cultivate equanimity, to find peace, to find balance, if even for the span of a Shabbat. Where politics is by nature adversarial, then how much we need the values of Shema, teaching us to strive for a sense of oneness for all, a vision of a greater goodness of humanity. And if politics divides us into parties and ideologies, how necessary to come back to a faith that lifts up that we are here with and for each other, finding oneness in our diversity. Indeed, good political work needs people who have cultivated the spiritual values of their faith.

Can we separate religion and state again, letting each do the work it was designed to do? If we can stand outside our current political climate, and look at politics with a different lens, we can begin to take hold of politics and reshape it. Rather than having politics pervade and take hold of our lives and shape who we are and who we become, let us turn the tables: politics is our tool for influencing society, we are not the tool of politics. Amen.