

## **RELIGIOUS FAITH AND OUR NATIONAL IDENTITY**

by

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Among the earliest European colonists to arrive in what is now the Northeastern United States were the pilgrims who landed on the coast of Massachusetts. Before they left the small ship, the Mayflower, and ventured to shore to establish what would be for them a new experience in living, they reached an agreement known historically as the Mayflower Compact. In 1620 these intrepid women and men seeking a life of freedom determined that they would recognize two principles by which their freedom would be guided: the law of God and the common good.

“In the name of God amen” they began this first written articulation of a political philosophy in the English Colonies that has served as an underpinning for the American political experience for almost four hundred years. At the heart of this formula is the understanding that God and God’s law – however it is known – is normative for human action and that in the application of that basic principle and its translation into positive civil law the common good would also exercise a normative function.

We recognize that same vision and generosity of spirit among the first Catholic colonists who arrived in Maryland in 1634 and set about establishing a civil government based on religious freedom and God’s law as a norm for a truly good and just society.

While it is true that portions of our country were colonized by Europeans, mainly from Spain, long before the arrival of those from England and portions of Northern Europe, nonetheless the enduring impact on the political structures that we recognize today derives from the political philosophy experienced in much of the original thirteen colonies with antecedents in English Common Law and political theory.

In a whole series of documents, from The Fundamental Orders in 1639 which was an effort at the first written Constitution that set permanent limitations on government power, and the Virginia Bill of Rights authored by Thomas Jefferson through the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 which guaranteed the inhabitants of that territory the same rights and privileges that the citizens of the thirteen states enjoyed, through the many colonial charters to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and our own United States Constitution in 1787, this theme is repeated over and over again. We are a free people who recognize the sovereignty of God and God’s law in our personal and societal life.

To explore the developments in the relationship of faith and public policy we need to begin with a recognition that in recent years we have witnessed a movement in some public opinion forums away from an appreciation of the basic religious values that underpin our laws – religious values accepted and expressed by a great variety of faith communities – to the assertion of the need to substitute a so-called secular frame of reference within which public policy should be articulated.

Yet the opposite conviction has long been a cornerstone of the American experience. It finds expression in our deep-seated conviction that we have inalienable rights from “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.”

Thomas Jefferson stated that the ideals and ideas which he set forth in the Declaration of Independence were not original with him, but were the common opinion of his day. In a letter to Henry Lee, dated May 8, 1825, Jefferson writes that the Declaration is “intended to be an expression of the American mind and to give that expression proper tone and spirit.”

The development of American political thought from the time of the Mayflower Compact resulted eventually in a composite political philosophy which guided the colonists at the time of the Revolution. It is found in a multiplicity of sources such as the Bible, sermons, classics in philosophical literature, platform addresses, newspaper discussions, pamphlets, official pronouncements and directives, resolutions of colonial assemblies, colonial charters and constitutions.

Out of all of these many threads, there is woven one common principle that is formative of the American political experience. The belief in the binding character of moral law is fundamental to any understanding of American thought. Government must be guided by foundational moral principles. All human government must be limited.

The intimate relation of the law of nature to God’s law was stated in terms of identity by John Barnard in his Massachusetts election sermon of 1734 where he stated: “This voice of nature is the voice of God.”

The understanding of God’s law at work and discernable through our rational nature also finds resonance in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which speaks not only of the foundational nature of the natural moral law but describes the commandments themselves as privileged expressions of the natural law.

We have become accustomed over centuries to the voice of the Church as the voice of conscience. Today the current debate on our military presence in Iraq is framed in no small part in principles rooted in Catholic moral theology. So is the question of abortion, embryonic stem cell research, physician assisted suicide and immigration involving Asian, Pacific rim and Latin American people.

As believers we look to our faith. We are both citizens of the nation and members of the Church. We should look to our most deeply held convictions when we address matters that effect our nation’s activities at home or abroad.

As Catholics we also look to our Church for guidance that can only come from God. We believe that the teaching of the Church represents for us an opening on to the wisdom of God.

Where the impact of well articulated faith-based principles most evidently helped to form public policy in the United States is in the area of human dignity and the working conditions that were a routine part of the American scene at the time of our grandparents and even parents. The Church brought to the debate the strongest moral voice even when she was not always welcome. Most of the social legislation of the 30<sup>ties</sup> and later finds its moral antecedent in the magisterium of the Church.

Catholic social teaching has traditionally marked as a milestone the publication of the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. This was the first focused and concentrated articulation of the Church's understanding of the dignity of workers and their rights. It also provided a rationale for explaining the worth of human labor itself – not that this was completely new. Over many centuries, commentators on the Book of Genesis expounded on the importance of human work and its place in God's plan.

The reason *Rerum Novarum* is highlighted so regularly is because it was the beginning of a long series of papal encyclicals and statements constantly developing the theme of human dignity and social justice.

Today our struggle is to achieve the same success using Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, and the Church's teaching tradition on the dignity of life in the defense of unborn human life.

Religious faith has played and continues to play a significant role in promoting social justice issues as it does in defending all innocent human life.

The dramatic shift that would substitute a secular vision of life for the traditional faith inclusive one disconnects us from our history.

The assertion that the "secular" model of society is the only acceptable way of addressing public policy issues causes us to look again at the place of religion and Gospel values in our efforts to build the common good.

What faith brings to our world is a way of seeing life and reality, a way of judging right and wrong, a norm against which we can see our life measured in light of the wisdom of God.

We simply cannot put aside all of this conviction of how we live and make important decisions and still be who we are as Catholics and as heirs to the American dream of personal freedom, faith and the common good.

We cannot divide personal morality and ethics from political life any more than we can separate spiritual values from human values. It is an unnatural and unhealthy condition for the individual and society so to compartmentalize our most firmly held convictions that they are not allowed to affect our public lives. Such a schizophrenic approach to life is, at best, unhealthy. Closer to the truth - it brings devastation to the person and to society.

Technology and science can provide us the ability to do many wonderful things. They have, in fact, extended far beyond the dreams of even a generation ago our capacity to accomplish things. But what human technology and science cannot answer is "ought we to do everything we can do?" The question this generation faces is reduced to a simple but highly sophisticated one: Is what we can do, always what we ought to do?

In the many tellings of the story of the clash between Henry VIII and Saint Thomas More, perhaps best presented in the play and movie *A Man for All Seasons*, there is the exchange between More and Richard Cromwell. Having replaced More as chancellor of England, Cromwell proceeds to curry favor with the king. Saint Thomas More reminds him that he is making a great mistake. "Your task," More says to Cromwell, "as counselor to the King is not to tell him what he can do; this he already knows. Your obligation is to tell him what he ought to do."

The voice of faith today is still the voice of conscience, the voice of God within our hearts calling us to what we ought to do.

I believe that the current effort to bleach out God from our public life will ultimately fail for a number of reasons. First, the secular view of life being imposed on our diverse pluralistic society does not reflect the reality of a nation made up almost entirely of people of faith. The recently espoused and increasingly imposed secular view of separation of God from public life does all of us a disservice because it is not reflective of the actual situation in which people live and institutions thrive.

God is a part of the lives of the overriding majority of people in our nation. This is demonstrated in poll after poll. To pretend otherwise ill prepares society to deal realistically with the actual human condition.

Personally I remain optimistic. Here each of us plays a part in the effort to balance what I suggest is seriously out of kilter. This is done in our own personal, serene but firm affirmation that God is a part of our life public and private. When enough people say what they believe, eventually it will be heard.

In order that we might assert the traditional place of faith and the necessary role of a transcendental, moral and ethical reference in our culture, we need a concerted and credible restatement of our position. In summary form these would include:

1. **The recognition of the artificial and defective nature of the secular model as the sole model for public political discourse. Every culture has recognized as innate to the human experience the need for a transcendent authority to sanction ultimately right from wrong. The secular model is not sufficient to sustain a true reflection on human action capable of giving guidance that is faithful to a life-giving understanding of human nature.**
2. **The need for a clearer articulation of the rationale for our moral and ethical positions particularly the medical/bioethical decisions which resonates with many who are disposed to accept the teaching of the Church.**

**It is not enough that we know the correct moral position in dealing with complex bioethical and life science issues today. We need to be able to communicate not only at the level of the scientific journal and intellectual elite, but also at the level of the participants in the consumer society.**

3. **Church institutions because they have a significant voice in the articulation of Catholic moral principles must be prepared to manifest courageously their commitment. Church institutions are instruments of the faith community which sees the living out of the Church's moral principles as: 1) essential to their own mission and 2) as a gift to the wider community. Institutional witness has to have an identity every bit as explicit as personal witness.**

**In the world that looks for perennial and spiritual values and in a society that needs to appreciate all the more the powerful gift of faith, we can take renewed strength in God's grace.**

**There will always be challenges and even difficulties associated with the recognition of God's hand guiding our lives. The prophet is judged by his fidelity to the message not by its acceptance or popularity.**

**What marks the current moment is deepening awareness of both the importance of what we do as people of faith and the significance of what we bring to our nation.**

**Looking to the future of our great country, we should do so with hope, confidence and enthusiasm, knowing that we bring something to the effort to build a good and just society and that no one else can. We share the wisdom and love of God.**

**We also need to reaffirm that as God was with the founders of this nation**

**So God continues to be with us.**

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