Religious Values and Public Policy  
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Last April my Church duties took me to Albania. Elder Hans B. Ringger and I were some of the first Western visitors to that newly opened country. We conferred with government officials about the reception our church’s missionaries would receive in Albania, which had banned all churches in 1967. They told us the government regretted its actions against religion, and that it now welcomed churches back to Albania. One explained, “We need the help of churches to rebuild the moral base of our country, which was destroyed by communism.” During the past months I have heard this same reaction during discussions with government and other leaders in Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine.

In contrast, consider what we hear about religion from some prominent persons in the United States. Some question the legitimacy of religious-based values in public policy debates. Some question the appropriateness of churches or religious leaders taking any public position on political issues. 

Provoked by that contrast, I will use this occasion to speak about the role of religion-based values and religious leaders in public policy debates.

Questions of Right and Wrong

Fundamental to the role of religion in public policy is this most important question: Are there moral absolutes? Speaking to our BYU students earlier this year, President Rex E. Lee said:

“I cannot think of anything more important than for each of you to build a firm, personal testimony that there are in this life some absolutes, things that never change, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. They are eternal truths, eternal principles and, as Paul tells us, they are and will be the same yesterday, today, and forever.” 1

Unfortunately, other educators deny the existence of God or deem God irrelevant to the human condition. Persons who accept this view deny the existence of moral absolutes. They maintain that right and wrong are relative concepts, and morality is merely a matter of personal choice or expediency. For example, a university professor reported that her students lacked what she called “moral common sense.” She said they believed that “there was no such thing as right or wrong, just good or bad arguments.” 2 In that view, even the most fundamental moral questions have at least two sides, and every assertion of right or wrong is open to debate.

I believe that these contrasting approaches underlie the whole discussion of religious values in public policy. Many differences of opinion over the role of religion in public life simply mirror a difference of opinion over whether there are moral absolutes. But this underlying difference is rarely made explicit. It is as if those who assume that all values are relative have established their assumption by law or tradition and have rendered illegitimate the fundamental belief of those who hold that some values are absolute.

One of the consequences of shifting from moral absolutes to moral relativism in public policy is that this produces a corresponding shift of emphasis from responsibilities to rights. Responsibilities originate in moral absolutes. In contrast, rights find their origin in legal principles, which are easily manipulated by moral relativism. Sooner or later the substance of rights must depend on either the voluntary fulfillment of responsibilities or the legal enforcement of duties. When our laws or our public leaders question the existence of absolute moral values, they undercut the basis for the voluntary fulfillment of responsibilities, which is economical, and compel our society to rely more and more on the legal enforcement of rights, which is expensive.

Some moral absolutes or convictions must be at the foundation of any system of law. This does not mean that all laws are so based. Many laws and administrative actions are simply a matter of wisdom or expediency. But many laws and administrative actions are based upon the moral standards of our
society. If most of us believe that it is wrong to kill or steal or lie, our laws will include punishment for those acts. If most of us believe that it is right to care for the poor and needy, our laws will accomplish or facilitate those activities. Society continually legislates morality. The only question is whose morality and what legislation.

In the United States, the moral absolutes are the ones derived from what we refer to as the Judeo-Christian tradition, as set forth in the Bible—Old Testament and New Testament.

Despite ample evidence of majority adherence to moral absolutes, some still question the legitimacy of a moral foundation for our laws and public policy. To avoid any suggestion of adopting or contradicting any particular religious absolute, some secularists argue that our laws must be entirely neutral, with no discernable relation to any particular religious tradition. Such proposed neutrality is unrealistic, unless we are willing to cut away the entire idea that there are moral absolutes.

Of course, not all moral absolutes are based on traditional religion. A substantial segment of society has subscribed to the environmental movement, which Robert Nisbet, a distinguished American sociologist, has characterized as a “national religion,” with a “universalized social, economic, and political agenda.” So far as I am aware, there has been no responsible public challenge to the legitimacy of laws based on the environmentalists’ set of values. I don’t think there should be. My point is that religious values are just as legitimate as those based on any other comprehensive set of beliefs.

Religion and the Public Sector

Let us apply these thoughts to the role of religions, churches, and church leaders in the public sector.

Some reject the infusion of religious-based values in public policy by urging that much of the violence and social divisiveness of the modern world is attributable to religious controversies. But all should remember that the most horrible moral atrocities of the twentieth century in terms of death and human misery have been committed by regimes that are unambiguously secular, not religious.

Even though we cannot reject religious values in law-making on the basis of their bad record by comparison with other values, there are examples of hostility to religious values in the public sector. For example, less than a decade ago, the United States Department of Justice challenged a federal judge’s right to sit on a case involving the Equal Rights Amendment on the ground that his religious views would prejudice him. The judge was Marion Callister. The religious views were LDS. In that same decade, the American Civil Liberties Union took the position that any pro-life abortion law was illegitimate because it must necessarily be founded on religious belief.

A few years ago some Protestant and Jewish clergymen challenged a federally financed program to promote abstinence from sexual activity among teenage youngsters. The grant recipients included BYU and some Catholic charities in Virginia and Michigan. The ACLU attorney who filed this challenge declared that “the ‘chastity law’ is unconstitutional because it violates the requirement for separation of church and state” because taxpayer dollars “are going to religious institutions, which use the funds to teach religious doctrines opposing teen-age sex and abortion.” In the meantime, the “value” judgments that permit public schools to distribute birth control devices to teenagers supposedly violate no constitutional prohibition because the doctrine that opposes chastity is secular.

During this same period, Professor Henry Steele Commager criticized the Moral Majority and the Roman Catholic Church for “inject[ing] religion into politics more wantonly than at any time since the Know-Nothing crusade of the 1850’s.” Writing in a New York Times column, this distinguished scholar asserted that “what the Framers [of the U. S. Constitution] had in mind was more than separating church and state: it was separating religion from politics.” While conceding that no one could question the right to preach “morality and religion,” Commager argued that churchmen of all denominations crossed an impermissible line “when they [page 62] connect morality with a particular brand of religious faith and this, in turn, with political policies.”

Apparently, churchmen can preach morality and religion as long as they do not suggest that their particular brand of religion has any connection with morality or that the resulting morality has any connection with political policies. Stated otherwise, religious preaching is okay so long as it has no
practical impact on the listeners’ day-to-day behavior, especially any behavior that has anything to do with political activity or public policy.

As we know, the idea that there is an absolute right and wrong comes from religion, and the absolute values that have influenced law and public policy are most commonly rooted in religion. In contrast, the values that generally prevail in today’s academic community are relative values.

I have read serious academic arguments to the effect that religious people can participate in public debate only if they conceal the religious origin of their values by translating them into secular dialect. In a nation committed to pluralism, this kind of hostility to religion should be legally illegitimate and morally unacceptable. It is also irrational and unworkable, for reasons explained by BYU law professor Frederick Mark Gedicks:

“Secularism has not solved the problem posed by religion in public life so much as it has buried it. By placing religion on the far side of the boundary marking the limit of the real world, secularism prevents public life from taking religion seriously. Secularism does not teach us to live with those who are religious; rather, it demands that we ignore them and their views. Such a ‘solution’ can remain stable only so long as those who are ignored acquiesce in their social situation.” 7

Fortunately, the Supreme Court has never held that citizens could not join together to translate their moral beliefs into laws or public policies even when those beliefs are derived from religious doctrine. Indeed, there are many sophisticated and articulate spokesmen for the proposition that the separation of church and state never intended to exclude religiously grounded values from the public square. For example, I offer the words of Richard John Neuhaus:

“In a democracy that is free and robust, an opinion is no more disqualified for being ‘religious’ than for being atheistic, or psychoanalytic, or Marxist, or just plain dumb. There is no legal or constitutional question about the admission of religion to the public square; there is only a question about the free and equal participation of citizens in our public business. Religion is not a reified ‘thing’ that threatens to intrude upon our common life. Religion in public is but the public opinion of those citizens who are religious.

“As with individual citizens, so also with the associations that citizens form to advance their opinions. Religious institutions may understand themselves to be brought into being by God, but for the purposes of this democratic polity they are free associations of citizens. As such, they are guaranteed the same access to the public square as are the citizens who comprise them.” 8

No person with values based on religious beliefs should apologize for taking those values into the public square. Religious persons need to be skillful in how they do so, but they need not yield to an adversary’s assumption that the whole effort is illegitimate. We should remind others of the important instances in which the efforts of churches and clergy in the political arena have influenced American public policies in great historical controversies whose outcome is virtually unquestioned today. The slavery controversy was seen as a great moral issue and became the major political issue of the nineteenth century because of the preaching of clergy and the political action of churches. A century later, churches played an indispensable role in the civil rights movement, and, a decade later, clergymen and churches of various denominations were an influential part of the antiwar movement that contributed to the end of the war in Vietnam.

Many sincere religious people believe there should be no limitations on religious arguments on political issues so long as the speaker genuinely believes those issues can be resolved as a matter of right or wrong.

I believe that questions of right and wrong, whether based on religious principles or any other source of values, are legitimate in any debate over laws or public policy. Is there anything more important to debate than what is right or wrong? And those arguments should be open across the entire political spectrum. There is no logical way to contend that religious arguments or lobbying are legitimate on the question of abstinence from nuclear war by nations but not on the question of abstinence from sexual relations by teenagers.
Church Participation in Political Debate

What limitations should churches and their leaders observe when they choose to participate in public debate on political issues?

I emphasize at the outset that I am discussing limits to guide all churches across a broad spectrum of circumstances. I am not seeking to define or defend a Mormon position. As a matter of prudence, our church has confined its own political participation within a far smaller range than is required by the law or the Constitution. Other churches have chosen to assert the full latitude of their constitutional privileges and, in the opinion of some, have even exceeded them.

Where should we draw the line between what is and is not permissable for church and church-leader participation in public policy making?

At one extreme, we hear shrill complaints about political participation by any persons whose political views are attributable to religious beliefs or the teachings of their church. The words “blind obedience” are usually included in such complaints. Complaints there are, but I am not aware of any serious or rational position that would ban religious believers from participation in the political process. The serious challenges concern the participation of churches and church leaders.

Perhaps the root fear of those who object to official church participation in political debates is power: They fear that believers will choose to follow the directions or counsel of their religious leaders. Those who have this fear should remember the celebrated maxim of Jefferson: “Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” Some may believe that reason is not free when religious leaders have spoken, but I doubt that any religious leader in twentieth-century America has such a grip on followers that they cannot make a reasoned choice in the privacy of the voting booth. In fact, I have a hard time believing that the teachings of religions or churches deprive their adherents of any more autonomy in exerting the rights of citizenship than the teachings and practices of labor unions, civil rights groups, environmental organizations, political parties, or any other membership group in our society.

I submit that religious leaders should have at least as many privileges as any other leaders, and that churches should stand on at least as strong a footing as any other corporation when they enter the public square to participate in public policy debates. The precious constitutional right of petition does not exclude any individual or any group. The same is true of freedom of speech and the press. When religion has a special constitutional right to its free exercise, religious leaders and churches should have more freedom than other persons and organizations, not less.

If churches and church leaders should have full rights to participate in public policy debates, should there be any limits on such participation?

Of course there are limits that apply specially to churches and church officials, as manifest in the United States Constitution’s prohibition against Congress’s making any law respecting an establishment of religion. Some linkages between churches and governments are obviously illegitimate. It would clearly violate this prohibition if a church or church official were to exercise government power or dictate government policies or direct the action of government officials independent of legal procedures or political processes.

Fundamentally, I submit that there is no persuasive objection in law or principle to a church or church leader taking a position on any legislative matter, if it or he or she chooses to do so.

Now, relative to church participation in public debate, when churches or church leaders choose to enter the public sector to engage in debate on a matter of public policy, they should be admitted to the debate and they should expect to participate in it on the same basis as all other participants. In other words, if churches or church leaders choose to oppose or favor a particular piece of legislation, their opinions should be received on the same basis as the opinions offered by other knowledgeable organizations or persons, and they should be considered on their merits.

By the same token, churches and church leaders should expect the same broad latitude of discussion of their views that conventionally applies to everyone else’s participation in public policy [page 64]
debates. A church can claim access to higher authority on moral questions, but its opinions on the application of those moral questions to specific legislation will inevitably be challenged by and measured against secular-based legislative or political judgments. As James E. Wood observed, “While denunciations of injustice, racism, sexism, and nationalism may be clearly rooted in one’s religious faith, their political applications to legislative remedy and public policy are by no means always clear.”

Finally, if church leaders were also to exhibit openness and tolerance of opposing views, they would help to overcome the suspicion and resentment sometimes directed toward church or church-leader participation in public debate.

In summary, I have pointed out that many U.S. laws are based on the absolute moral values most Americans affirm, and I have suggested that it cannot be otherwise. I have contended that religious-based values are just as legitimate a basis for political action as any other values. And I have argued that churches and church leaders should be able to participate in public policy debates on the same basis as other persons and organizations, favoring or opposing specific legislative proposals or candidates if they choose to do so.

Politicians sometimes seek to use religion for political purposes, and they sometimes even seek to manipulate churches or church leaders. Ultimately this is always self-defeating. Whenever a church (or a church leader) becomes a pawn or servant of government or a political leader, it loses its status and the credibility it needs to perform its religious mission.

Churches or their leaders can also be the aggressors in the pursuit of intimacy with government. The probable results of this excess have been ably described as “the seduction of the churches to political arrogance and political innocence or even the politicizing of moral absolutes.”

The relationship in the world between church and state and between church leaders and politicians should be respectful and distant, as befits two parties who need one another but share the realization that a relationship too close can deprive a pluralistic government of its legitimacy and a divine church of its spiritual mission. Despite that desirable distance, government need not be hostile to religion or pretend to ignore God.