

Saul, Paul, and Dual Identity

Chapel Talk at St. Olaf College
October 25, 2000

Hymns: 557, "Let all things now living"; 437:1&4, "Not alone for mighty empire."

Reading from Acts:

9: 1-9: Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

(Meanwhile, God tells a disciple named Ananias to visit Paul, which Ananias is reluctant to do, given Saul's notoriety among the disciples. But he goes.)

9: 17-18: Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

(And then, as we know, the born-again Saul changes his name to Paul, perhaps marking his dramatic change in religious identity, and becomes the great missionary apostle. But his former allies, the priests, have him arrested in Jerusalem on trumped-up charges, and Paul must defend himself in front of the Roman governor, Festus, who, like most governors outside of St. Paul, is trying to please everyone.)

25: 8-12: Paul said in his defense, "I have in no way committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor." But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, asked Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and be tried there before me on these charges?" Paul said, "I am appealing to the emperor's tribunal; this is where I should be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you very well know. Now if I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor." Then Festus, after he had

conferred with his council, replied, "You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go."

(A Roman citizen's appeal to Caesar amounted to what linguistic philosophers call a "performative utterance": it not only *means* something; it *does* something; analogous to making a promise, which creates a new moral reality, appealing to the emperor's tribunal actually creates a new legal reality. This can be a mixed but irreversible blessing, as Paul discovers after he persuades both Festus and King Agrippa of his innocence.)

26: 31-32: and as they were leaving, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor."

"Religion and politics" is the title of our series, and the issue I wish to consider today is how and when we should use our own religious beliefs and identity--or those of others--as we debate and decide about both candidates and legislative issues.

Religion is big this year; several candidates regularly talk about being born again--the type of experience we associate with St. Paul. Of course, Joe Lieberman, in some ways the most vocal theologian, doesn't claim *that*, and he certainly doesn't claim--as does one of the presidential candidates--that Jesus is his favorite philosopher. However, as Gary Trudeau's chaplain in the Doonesbury comic strip insists, Lieberman does preach a new-testament-sounding God: inclusive, with a smiley face for everyone; not that older tribal warrior, or jealous king, or stern judge. And everyone was relieved to hear that his Modern Orthodox version of Sabbath observance has a "Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath" type of qualification that allows him to do whatever needs to be done whenever human life, and probably even human welfare, is at risk. And Lieberman certainly could have and would have joined us in the theistically ecumenical hymn we just joyfully sang.

Some people are probably thrilled with this religious revival on the campaign trail, believing, with Stephen Carter, in such books as *The Culture of Disbelief* and *The Dissent of the Governed*, that separation of church and state has gone too far, has created a naked public square in which we are not allowed to reveal our true identity and our deepest convictions, and has created legitimate resentment by those who take their religion seriously and who want to discuss--as, let's remember, did Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King--what is God's will for justice in the Republic, but who are told by many to privatize their religious beliefs and even their prayers, while the secular humanists are allowed to set both the agenda and the terms of the debate. Carter points out that the bigger task of a democracy is to cultivate the loyalty of not of the majority, who are the winners after all, but the loyalty of the dissenting minorities, and that one important way to do that is to allow--even encourage--the minorities to talk about their distinctive religious identities and thereby discuss the deep reasons why they think and feel the way they do about the political issues of the day.

However, all this God-talk is upsetting to others. Interestingly it was not the

American Civil Liberties Union, but a Jewish watch-dog group--the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith--that sent Lieberman a letter (August 28) asking him to tone down. Jews, after all, have every reason to become nervous when the tom-tom beat of religious enthusiasm gets loud; what happens to those who have *not* had the scales fall from their eyes; will the newly-born insight call for coercive legislation that impinges on those who don't see things the same religious way, including the atheists that B'nai B'rith defends.

Even if we could separate church and state--and the phrase is not found in the constitution--we certainly cannot separate religion and politics, if for no other reason than that we cannot separate religion and politicians, or religion and voters. The United States has had mixed experiences with presidents and religion. Eisenhower, it has been said, had a very strong devotion to a very vague theology, while John Kennedy had a very distinctive theology--so precise that some actually worried that he might take marching orders from his religious authorities--but it turned out that he had a rather vague devotion to it (and them). (By the way, the Pope could easily point out that marching orders have been used as much against Catholics as by them, and a week from Sunday, two days before our election, he is going to declare as the patron saint of politicians Sir Thomas More, who was beheaded by Henry the VIII for sticking to his Catholic vows.)

At any rate, nebulous theology or low zeal are one thing, it's something else when a candidate combines clear and distinctive religious beliefs with genuine religious fervor, as does Joe Lieberman, and as did Jimmy Carter before him. With Carter, there wasn't much worry about church authorities telling him what to do; indeed, you may have read that last week he up and left the Southern Baptist Convention because it bans women from becoming pastors. The worry was--and for some is again--the extent to which distinctive theology might shape foreign policy or domestic legislation. Remember how nervous people got about the rumor that Ronald Reagan was letting some murky passages in the books of Daniel and Revelation influence his views about a coming Armageddon?

I believe that the passages we read today are not murky and that they do shed some light on how we might think about what we could call our dual identity. The attraction of something like the notion of dual identity, and even dual citizenship, came naturally to the early Christians because for several hundred years they were a minority group always at risk of persecution. No wonder its founding documents talk about rendering unto God what is God's and unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Of course, some things were written that make one wonder precisely which things are which, but Christians did not have to face this problem in a political way until they had Christian Caesars--Constantine and his successors--who actually were obliged to get it straight.

Hypocrisy was not what led some Christians astray here; there really is a quite reasonable argument for an arrangement in which the church authorities tell the civil authorities who are the heretics and what unpleasant things to do to them. If correct religious belief and practice is known to the proper authorities, and if any person with an

ounce of sense can know who the proper authorities are, and if eternal salvation or damnation hangs on getting it right, then charity requires that heretical apostates--who, unlike the ignorant heathen should know better--be forced painfully to confront their error, be given mercifully a chance to repent before they slowly die, and be eventually killed if they don't repent, in order to protect them from making eternity even worse for themselves, and in order to protect other innocent and precious souls from a pernicious poison that risks giving them a fate infinitely worse and infinitely longer than physical pain and death.

This "tough love" argument is reasonable if and only if the premises are, and I can imagine that at some points in human history these premises could be reasonably held. But John Locke, among others, pointed out that, after Luther, at least, it was not reasonable to accept all the premises and that, in any case, life would be nasty, brutish and short unless we allow in the same civil society those who agree to disagree on at least some important religious matters.

Many of Locke's most persuasive arguments were frankly pragmatic and prudential ones: he argued what has been called the "liberalism of fear" view that if we want to live we must let live. But he also had some more principled arguments, such as the point that true belief is inward, and could not be coerced; we can force each other to *say* things, but not to deep-down *believe* them. Jews have just observed Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of their year, and you may know that it includes the singing of the hauntingly soulful but controversial Kol Nidrei, in which the participants renounce all vows taken the previous year. Why do such a thing, which seems to allow an opening for raising questions about trustworthiness? Well, it is quite possible that the tradition goes back to the days of the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews were invited to be baptized or beheaded. It is understandable that one would want release for being coerced on pain of torture and death into swearing something one didn't believe. By the way, before we get too smug about condemning such religious coercion by others, we should remember that there is a reason why our own dear St. Olaf is so often pictured with a big ax in his hand.

Since Locke, Christians have recovered additional principled reasons for tolerating and even respecting differences in religious beliefs. In particular, the doctrine of being created in God's image gives us theological reasons for respecting the autonomy of others and for limiting the ways that we try to influence each other's beliefs and behavior, even when we are motivated by love and truth. And these reasons have political implications, like the one we noticed in today's reading. Between Saul and Paul was a tremendous and dramatic change in what we could call his religious identity (or what could be called his spiritual, or moral identity, or, if you are into political philosophy, what you might call his comprehensive doctrine, or his thick theory of the good, or his socially and culturally encumbered self, or, if you are into continental post-modernism, his historically contingent weltanschauung--world-and-life-view). Whatever we call it, something very important about his personal identity changed, in sharp contrast to what we could call his civic or institutional identity, which

remained unchanged, which is why his appeal to the emperor's tribunal had precisely the same (albeit mixed) effect it would have had before he was reborn spiritually.

And ever since Locke, what we call classical political liberalism (which is not "liberal" vs. "conservative" but simply connotes the emphasis on political equality and the rights of individuals) has taken a clue from that distinction, which, for simplicity, I label "dual identity," even though some of us may have multiple identities. Taking this distinction seriously is especially the case in the United States, where we have almost put into a lock(e)box the first amendment right to free exercise of religion, along with the clause that, as we will see, sometimes rubs against it, the non-establishment of religion. This is not the only way to tolerate religious differences: one could have a state religion that allows at least some dissenting churches, and one could even have a quasi-theocracy, like the millet system of the Ottoman Empire, in which recognized religious minorities are allowed their own religious law. But, for what I think are good reasons, political liberalism has leaned toward not having the state establish any religion, and even toward the much more controversial interpretation--the separation of church and state. And this is why many of us are very leery about appealing to distinctive theological claims to support particular candidates or specific legislation; insofar as such appeals would be successful, it would seem to border on establishing, if not a church, at least a particular religious outlook.

But, at the same time, Stephen Carter reminds us that such a prohibition creates problems for the free exercise of religion, especially for those "integrative" believers whose theology commits them to asking what is God's will for political and economic justice. Do I mean to say that they are not free to exercise their religion when debating and deciding such issues as abortion legislation or marriage laws? Good thing I wasn't around when the abolitionists used thunder from the pulpit in order to stop slavery, not just for them to have the right not to own slaves, notice, but to remove the legal right of others to own them. No wonder some religious believers resent what they see as the effort to privatize and thereby trivialize their deepest convictions and identity, while secularism gets away, some of them think, quite literally with murder.

Well, nobody said that dual identity wouldn't have any tensions, or even some dueling. A couple of concluding points can be made for something like a middle way here. First, the public square includes a lot more than just voting and debating legislation, and everyone is free to exercise their right to say publicly exactly what they think theologically about any number of cultural and political issues. And we are free to sing almost anywhere, including over the radio, that all things now living should praise God, and, as we will soon do, about the short-sightedness of seeking merely mighty empire. The non-establishment of religion definitely does not mean it cannot be public.

Second, for moral self-restraint, a non-establishment consideration should also apply to any distinctive and controversial moral and metaphysical outlook, not just to theological ones. Even if there is and should be nothing illegal about it, I should restrain myself from arguing for coercive legislation using only moral premises that I know must be rejected by those who would be coerced. Thereby responsible political citizens

respect the moral and religious identities of others.

Third, there's nothing wrong with using distinctive theological and moral arguments, even for coercive legislation, as long as one is willing and able to also use sufficient arguments that one has good reasons for thinking that the others can accept. Notice that the abolitionists, Martin Luther King, and plenty of others who appealed to religious motivation, could also give arguments for their cause that appealed to everyone. And most of the arguments about abortion and euthanasia are in fact geared to appeal to everyone with their considerations about line-drawing and likely effects of policy on the vulnerable.

Finally, however, I have to admit that sometimes one's moral or religious identity will be the main motivation for a particular policy affecting all political citizens. One could write a book--in fact that's what I'm trying to do--about the problems here. For now, let's return to Paul. In a passage we didn't read, he says to King Agrippa that he wishes that others might become as he is, "except," he says, "for these chains." The chains can stand as a metaphor for coercion, and insofar as Paul was in them for his religious beliefs, we are reminded to be very careful about confusing the religious and the civic identities of ourselves or others.

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