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RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION

A PUBLIC LECTURE GIVEN AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF DAYTON
SEPTEMBER 22ND 2006

*James L. Heft, S.M.**

It is a great pleasure to return home to the University of Dayton after having moved to Los Angeles at the end of June. Life in these two cities, Dayton and Los Angeles, is very different, but my heart will always remain at this great Catholic university. One of my former students, still here as an undergraduate, saw the poster advertising this talk and sent me an e-mail that read: "you've talked about that already." Indeed, she is, in a general way, correct. I did address one then current manifestation of this difficult and complex topic—religion and politics—two years ago, when the presidential election pitted a pro-choice Catholic Democratic candidate, John Kerry, against the Republican Methodist candidate and incumbent president George W. Bush. That talk, subsequently published in the May 2005 issue of the journal of the British Dominicans, *New Blackfriars*, led to an invitation in March of this year from the members of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians to enter a conversation with them and with six Catholic university presidents about how Catholic colleges and universities should deal with Catholic politicians who differ with the Church official teachings on various matters, especially abortion.¹ We will have time later in this lecture to refer to the bishops' Task Force and their report to the entire bishops' conference held in June of this year. Last year I addressed another issue in U.S. culture wars: evolution, Intelligent Design, and Catholic theology.

While the general theme of this afternoon's lecture is similar to these two previous lectures, especially the one I gave two years ago, in that it talks about faith, culture, and politics, it is still not the same. I am less interested this afternoon in the positions of Kerry and Bush and how Catholics should think about voting in that election than I am in the ongoing deeper issue that stands behind it—the relationship between religion and politics in our country and how Catholic thought, in its roots and

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¹ James L. Heft, *US Catholics and the Presidential Election: Abortion and Proportionate Reasons*, 86 *New Blackfriars*, 1003, 259 (May 2005).

especially in its contemporary expressions, might contribute to a fruitful understanding of that seemingly ever-controversial relationship.

Sometime in the fall of 1961, when I was a novice in the Society of Mary, I remember coming across an article in the Constitution of the Order that read: "the humble man [does not] speak of himself, of his relations, of his country, of his labors, of what he has been, nor of what he has done elsewhere, unless obliged by duty to do so. No allusion is made to nationalities."² Some of the older brothers I lived with then added that it was also not wise to speak of religion and politics, even when asked.

However, by the time the Marianists revised their Constitution in 1981, we find a quite different understanding of the relationship between the Marianists and politics. We now read, for example, that "[t]he gospel ... challenges us to tasks of liberation, reconciliation, and human development"³; and "[p]olicies and practices toward our employees and our relationships with political and economic structures should regularly be evaluated";⁴ Marianists should "collaborate with movements that promote justice and peace" and be "responsive to human needs as they arise"⁵; and finally, "[s]ome Marianists work directly with [the poor] and help them see the link between the search for justice and the gospel message."⁶ The delegates of the General Chapter that met in Rome in 2001 encouraged members of the Society to engage in "social analysis," a typically dangerous activity that raises questions about the political and social *status quo* in order to seek a more just sharing of the goods of the earth.⁷

The understanding of the Society of Mary and of the Catholic Church about the relationship between politics and the faith has obviously changed—and changed rather dramatically over the past fifty years. With the Second Vatican Council ("Vatican II"), the Catholic Church has taken a much more serious look than ever before at the world we live in and asked what responsibilities it has for its welfare. While the two Vatican decrees in the mid-80s condemned a form of liberation theology that depended too much on Marxism, it never pulled back on the Christian's civic and social responsibilities. Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, distinguished between Church and state, but though he said the two are

² *Const. of the Socy. of Mary*, art. 228 (1910) (superseded 1981 by *Rule of Life of the Socy. of Mary*, *infra* n. 3).

³ *Rule of Life of the Socy. of Mary*, bk. II, art. 5.16 (1981).

⁴ *Id.* at art. 5.18.

⁵ *Id.* at art. 5.19.

⁶ *Id.* at art. 5.20.

⁷ The *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* defines social analysis as follows: "while there are many forms of social analysis, it is in essence a social critique; in other words, social analysis does not assume that 'the way things are' is the way they must be, but projects a vision of ways in which society can and should be improved." Assn. of Marianist Universities, *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* 20, <http://campus.udayton.edu/~amu-usa/pdfs/characteristics.pdf> (1999).

distinct, they are, he added, “always interrelated.”⁸ Although much is now written about the massive and complex process of globalization, it is perhaps ironic that much of the ecclesiastical writing about justice and peace no longer mentions nationalities, nor does it explore the role of individual nation states. Perhaps the old Marianist Rule of Life was onto something in cautioning the brothers about discussing national identities. Of course, the old Rule prohibited such conversation; the drafters of the Constitution knew such discussion could be volatile.⁹ This admonition of the old Rule was surely based on the realization that nationalities can become grounds for conflicts. In the new dispensation that encourages social analysis, we should not forget the key role nations play, for better and for worse, in the work of world peace and social justice. I shall speak later about how the issues of justice need to be tied to the influence and policies of nation states. Even though we are moving into a greater global awareness, some nation states, certainly one such as our own, still exercise great global influence economically and militarily.

Despite the great shift in perspective from the old Constitution of the Marianists to their new Rule of Life, one thing has remained rather constant: the amount of controversy and tension and disagreement that diverse convictions about the relationship between religion and politics generate. Surely one of the reasons for this continuing debate is the exceptionally religious character of American citizens, the roots of which can be traced to the Puritans who arrived here in the seventeenth century, and who referred to the new society they intended to build as a “city on a hill,” an allusion to a new Jerusalem.¹⁰ And for that matter, before the arrival of the Puritans Christopher Columbus had claimed the new world for a Catholic crown. All of them shared the pre-modern assumption that religion and government were inseparable. But by the time of the American Revolution, their separation was not only envisioned, it was written into law in the newly born country’s Anglo-American founding documents. Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the 1830s that Protestantism actually functions as the “first political institution”¹¹ in the U.S., and that it worked very well with the government in which, though the government allows its peoples to do everything, “there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.”¹² Abraham Lincoln knew the Bible well, and even though he was not personally religious, he referred to the American people as “God’s almost-chosen people.”¹³ The U.S. seems to be, as many

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus caritas est*, § 28a, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html (Dec. 25, 2005).
encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-

⁹ *Const. of Socy. of Mary*, *supra* n. 2, art. 228.

¹⁰ Gerald L. Sittser, *Being American and Christian: Faithful Citizens*, *Christian Century* 32-35, 32 (July 11, 2006) (quoting John Winthrop).

¹¹ *Id.* at 35 (quoting Alexis de Tocqueville).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 32 (quoting Abraham Lincoln).

have put it, a “nation with the soul of a church,”¹⁴ or as some would add today, the soul of a mosque, a synagogue, a Hindu Temple, and so on. Presidents still take their oath of office with their right hand placed squarely on the Bible, and Congress not only has its own Christian chaplain, but also provides the salaries for military chaplains from several religious traditions.

From these brief descriptions of the change in social consciousness of the Catholic Church and the Marianists, and of the pervasiveness of religious belief and practice in the U.S., it would seem that “secularism” as a cultural movement must be, at least now, a weak force in American culture and politics. The actual picture is more complicated. The religious consensus of the latter part of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth represented a form of civil religion shaped especially by mainline Protestant churches. The sociologist Will Herberg published in 1955: *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*, which argued that by the time of the Second World War these three religious faiths had found a way to cooperate and support a consensus about the country’s civil religion.¹⁵ The major changes in the American consensus on the roles of politics and religion took place in the 60s. The Supreme Court banned prayer in public schools and a decade later legalized abortion; these decisions galvanized the conservative Christian movement that by the 80s had grown into full-fledged culture wars. Most conspicuous on the national political scene in the 80s and 90s have been the Evangelicals and neo-conservatives, which include some Catholics like George Weigel and Michael Novak. Both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton talked like Evangelicals, as does George W. Bush. Genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, and now also in Darfur; wars in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq; and intense debates at home about foreign policy, abortion, and more recently, homosexual unions and stem-cell research have exacerbated divisions between and within the country’s religious communities.

Faced with this broad, contentious terrain, I can shed some light only if in this lecture I focus on some manageable and important part of the controversy. I have chosen this afternoon to focus on what Catholics might contribute to this complex topic of religion and politics. The results of a recent survey conducted by pollsters at the University of Akron found that mainline Protestants and Catholics do not see as close a relationship between their religion and their politics as do Evangelicals. When asked how important religion was in their political thinking, 58% of Evangelicals and 32% of mainline Protestants answered it was important, but only 26% of Catholics agreed.¹⁶ These statistics admit, however, of several interpretations. Is it the case that mainline Protestants and Catholics now

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1955).

¹⁶ David Heim, *Voters and Values: The Divided Mind of the Religious Left*, *Christian Century*, 26-29, 26 (Aug. 8, 2006).

constitute the majority of suburban affluent communities, and would just as soon have their religion be separated from any social justice agenda? Is it that Catholics who have clear moral positions (on such issues as abortion and homosexuality) sever their morality from politics? Or, is it that Catholics see moral issues in a more complex way, a way that opposes abortion, war, and tax policies that favor the rich—so that they are unable to relate fully to the platform of either the Democratic or Republican parties? Or is it the case that Catholic social teachings still remain one of the *best kept secrets*, especially from well-to-do Catholics? I am not sure how to interpret the Catholic response to the Akron survey, but I do think we can get a better grasp of what Catholic thought might contribute to the national debate about religion and politics by reviewing some history, and then turning to the most recent instances of Catholic thought in the U.S. on this topic.

A Few Notes from History

If we were to start with the New Testament, we would find that there are not any texts that spell out the relationship between religion and politics. The first Christians were in no position to be power brokers in the Roman Empire. I will return later to some key texts that have in our own time been frequently cited in this regard and just as frequently misinterpreted. But here I only want to point out that by the fourth century, when Constantine had established Christianity as the religion of the Empire, the relationship between the Church and the government was one that ideally was mutually reinforcing. There were, of course, classic confrontations between some bishops and political rulers (e.g. Ambrose versus Theodosius in the late fourth century, or Gregory the Great versus Henry IV in the eleventh century, to mention only two). But by the high Middle Ages, the relationship between the Church and the state had reached an articulation that made clear the authority of the Church over the state.

If Christians in the West wish to find an example of that articulation in, let us say, its most robust form, they can do no better (or worse, depending on your point of view) than turn to Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303), an example that will offend the sensibilities of most Christians today. I have in mind the famous, or the infamous, 1302 decree of Boniface, *Unam Sanctam*,¹⁷ which took the text from Luke's gospel in which Jesus is with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "[a]nd they [the disciples] said, 'Look Lord, there are two swords.' And he said to them, 'It is enough.'"¹⁸ Combining this text with the Romans 13:4 text, "He does not bear the sword in vain" (a text typically used by authors as a metaphor for political authority), Boniface VIII makes the following argument:

¹⁷ Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam* (Nov. 18, 1302) (translation available at <http://www.shrine.com/Unam.htm> (last accessed Nov. 4, 2006)).

¹⁸ *Luke* 22:38.

We learn from the words of the Gospel that in this church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. For when the apostles said, "Behold, here" (that is, in the church, since it was the apostles who spoke) "are two swords"—the Lord did not reply, "It is too much," but "It is enough." Truly he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter, misunderstands the words of the Lord (John 18:11), "Put up thy sword into the sheath."¹⁹

Unam Sanctam argued that given the doctrine of the two swords, the Church itself exercised the first—the spiritual sword—over all people, and the exercise of the second sword—the material sword—was entrusted to princes and kings and captains. The former sword was to be exercised by the Church, the latter only for the Church, but according to the will and permission of the priest. It is this papal bull that asserted that the temporal power is to be judged by the Church, but that the Church is to be judged only by God. It also asserted that, given its logic, it was necessary for everyone to be subject to the Pope if he or she was to be saved. Boniface was the last of the medieval popes to claim this form of ecclesial supremacy in relationship to the political order; Dante did not hesitate to put him in hell.²⁰ It would require the thinking of Roberto Bellarmine three centuries later to defend not the direct, but only the indirect authority of the Church in matters of politics.²¹ These resources from the history of Catholicism do not look that promising if we are looking for ways to understand the relationship between religion and politics today.

So, let's take another historical and conceptual leap—a leap of six and a half centuries from Boniface VIII to John XXIII (1958-1963), from the beginning of the fourteenth to the twentieth century. For the first time in its history, the Church declared at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) a doctrine of religious freedom. One of the very foundations of U.S. government, the separation of Church and state, finally gets recognition. I admit, this recognition seems a little late—but Catholic time moves more slowly than most other forms of time, and especially slower than time in an age of instant media coverage. The Church's doctrine on religious freedom actually approved—not just grudgingly accepted—the separation of Church and State. Alluding to Boniface VIII's bull, the Vatican II declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*, cited the same Gospel texts that Boniface did, but revised its interpretation of the sword to declare that *Christ's kingdom is not upheld by the sword*.²² At the same time, the bishops at Vatican II acknowledged in that same document that at times in

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible & the Constitution*, 82 (Yale U. Press, 2004) (quoting Boniface VIII *Unam Sanctam*, *supra* n. 17).

²⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, canto 19.

²¹ Roberto Bellarmine, *Disputationes De Controversiis Christianae Fidei* (Ingolstadt 1588-1593).

²² Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* 799, 807-809 (Austin Flannery ed., Liturgical Press 1975).

the life of the people of God, as it has pursued its pilgrimage through the twists and turns of human history, there have been ways of acting hardly in tune with the spirit of the gospel, indeed contrary to it.²³ In the centuries since the Reformation, the Church has argued that ideally it should be the established religion of any state in which the majority of the citizens were Catholic; other Christians and religions would be allowed to practice, but only with the permission of the Church. Once Western civilization witnessed the rise of autonomous nations and from the time of the French Revolution, on the declarations in favor of a secular public sphere, the Church found itself more and more on the defensive in its relationship with national governments. With Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom, however, the Church recognized the legitimate autonomy of the state. And though the Church had before spoken against coercion in matters of conscience, its statement at Vatican II was especially explicit on this matter: "Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power."²⁴

But just how the Church should relate to the state and vice versa has hardly been settled. The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, the principal architect of Vatican II's document on religious freedom, had argued that in the U.S. a sufficient consensus (reflected in natural law theory) existed on basic moral principles to permit a cooperative relationship between the Church and the state.²⁵ But within a decade of the close of the Council, the trauma of the Vietnam War and the Supreme Court's decision to legalize abortion fractured that moral consensus in the U.S. Moreover, by the 80s, one political party deliberately appealed to religious voters to cement its political fortunes. Absent that consensus, religious people in general and Catholics in particular have divided, sometimes bitterly, over how the Church should interact with the state, especially when the latter has in fact enacted legislation that many in the country's religious communities oppose.

The Most Recent Exchanges on the Relationship of Religion and Politics

Several events have played an important catalytic role in clarifying the relationship of faith communities to the political order. I mentioned earlier the unique situation of the 2004 pro-choice Catholic presidential candidate John Kerry. It was unique in the sense that unlike John Kennedy, who was attacked by Protestants who feared he would be taking his orders as president from the Vatican, Kerry was attacked by some fellow Catholics and bishops for his position on abortion. A handful of the over two hundred U.S. bishops recommended excommunication not only for Kerry, but also

²³ *Id.* at 809.

²⁴ *Id.* at 800.

²⁵ See generally Special Issue, *Dignitatis Humanae, The Declaration of Religious Liberty, on its Fortieth Anniversary*, 24 U.S. Catholic Historian 1 (Winter 2006) (a recent issue completely devoted to revisiting the work of John Courtney Murray and the Council's document on religious freedom).

for every Catholic who voted for him. Shortly after the presidential elections the U.S. bishops' conference appointed, under the leadership of recently retired Cardinal Archbishop of Washington, D.C. Theodore McCarrick, a Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians. This Task Force submitted its final report in June of this year. In essence, the report asked the bishops to avoid statements that further polarized Catholic voters and enter into serious conversation with Catholic politicians.²⁶ Besides the bishops' report, a number of other Catholics and political leaders have recently addressed the issue. It will be useful for our purposes this afternoon to look at statements by several prominent Catholics, especially the 55 Catholic Democrats in the House of Representatives and the Task Force's response to them, and also by Barack Obama, a liberal Protestant who recently gave a major address on religion and politics.²⁷

Let me start with Obama. No politician, in my opinion, has addressed the issue of religion and politics at the length and with the substance as did Barack Obama, the Democratic senator from Illinois who electrified much of the nation in his speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention. On June 28, 2006, he gave the keynote address to the *Call to Renewal* organization, a mainly Democratic, faith-based movement to overcome poverty.²⁸ Catholic political columnist E.J. Dionne called it the most significant statement on Church-state relations since John Kennedy's address in 1960 to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, a group of over three hundred Evangelical ministers.²⁹ But with Obama we have a very different situation — one that is nearly the opposite of the one Kennedy faced. Instead of assuring ministers, as Kennedy did, that his faith as a Catholic would not affect his decisions as President, Obama the Senator chastised his fellow Democrats for failing to “acknowledge the power of faith . . . in the lives of the American people.”³⁰ He sets out to face squarely the “mutual suspicion that sometimes exists between religious America and secular America.”³¹ He states that it is time that we “join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.”³² He warns against scrubbing language “of all religious content,” since to do so is to “forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of

²⁶ See generally Theodore McCarrick, Oral Report to U.S. Bishop's Conference, *Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians* (D.C., June 15, 2006) (available at <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/mccarrickrpt6-06.shtml>).

²⁷ For a helpful survey of the impact of evangelical Protestants on American politics, see Walter Russell Mead, *God's Country? Evangelicals and Foreign Policy*, 85 *For. Affairs* 24 (Sept./Oct. 2006). He describes how the shift in American politics has moved away from liberal Protestants, who held sway till the early 60s, to the evangelical Protestants. He says little about Catholics, the second largest faith group and single largest Church in the U.S., except that they “present a more mixed picture with fewer foreign policy implications.” *Id.* at 25.

²⁸ Barack Obama, Keynote Address, *Call to Renewal* (D.C., June 28, 2006) (available at http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060628-call_to_renewal_keynote_address/index.html).

²⁹ E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Public Officials Under God*, *Washington Post* A15 (Feb. 28, 2006).

³⁰ Obama, *supra* n. 28.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice.”³³ He does not believe that every liberal should now try in some strained way to latch on to religious language, nor does he believe that religious people have a monopoly on morality. In perhaps his most insightful paragraph, Obama declares:

[W]hat I am suggesting is this—secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas [sic], Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant [sic], Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King—indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history—were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause.³⁴ So to say that men and women should not inject their “personal morality” into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.³⁵

Obama then adds an important qualification to this bold legitimization of religious language in the public square. He states:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God’s will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.³⁶

He concluded his lecture with an example of how a thoughtful Chicago physician opposed to abortion criticized the language on his campaign web site which suggested that Obama would fight “right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman’s right to choose.”³⁷ Obama thought about the physician’s carefully reasoned challenge, and the next day had the offending language changed so that his pro-choice position was less

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Author Philip Simmons writes, “[o]f all the sources of insight available to me, I turn to religion in particular because it is with religious language that human beings have most consistently, rigorously, and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak.” *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* xiv (Bantam Dell 2000).

³⁵ Obama, *supra* n. 28.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

dismissive of those who are pro-life.³⁸ His language changed; his position on the legality of abortion remained the same.

Obama's speech takes us well beyond John F. Kennedy's 1960 position. Let me summarize Obama's main points. He recognizes the influence of religion on most Americans, legitimates its usefulness in the public square, but also asks that religiously based arguments be translated into arguments that can be understood and embraced by people who do not share the same religious tradition. He makes it clear that almost all law embodies morality, so that it is possible to "legislate morality," but only that morality on which there is a consensus sufficient for enforcement. He appeals to religious *moderates* to not hide their religion in public lest other less moderate Christians, like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, seize and define the public face of Christianity. All in all, I believe that Obama, as a politician, has made a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics—not only because in the present culture wars he has demonstrated that it is possible to use religious language to think through public policy goals from something other than a conservative perspective, but also because he realized that positions that differ from his own need to be respected.

So in the meantime, what are the Catholics contributing to this important national debate about the relationship between religion and politics? During the 2004 Presidential Election, the performance of the most visible Catholic leaders was hardly stellar. Vatican II had shown that Catholics can do better than the *two swords* arrangement proposed by Boniface VIII. So, can we do better? I think we can and we have. And it is to these hopeful signs I now turn. I want to describe this new Catholic contribution by starting with relevant Scripture texts and their proper interpretation. This may seem like a very Protestant thing to do—to start with Scripture, but I think it is sometimes wise to learn things from Protestants—here certainly, the primacy of scripture, if not always its interpretation.

In two recent articles that appeared in *America* magazine, Catholic scripture scholar Dennis Hamm offers some insightful commentary on several New Testament passages that have been interpreted in ways that privatize religion, a privatization of religion that we, in a country that has separated Church and state, are very tempted to do.³⁹ Consider, for example, the New Testament texts: "the poor you will always have with you";⁴⁰ "[r]ender to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's";⁴¹ and "[t]he kingdom of God is within you."⁴² The

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Dennis Hamm, *Dodging Faith's Call*, 194 *America* 11, 8 (Mar. 27, 2006); Dennis Hamm, *Faith's Call to Justice*, 195 *America* 3, 18 (July 31, 2006).

⁴⁰ *Matthew* 26:11, *Mark* 14:7, and *John* 12:8.

⁴¹ *Mark* 12:17; *Matthew* 22:21; and *Luke* 20:25.

first text is understood as a statement of fact—that some people will always be poor and there is little to be done about it. The second—that there is a clear separation of those things having to do with the world of politics and with the world of religion—a biblical anticipation of the doctrine of the separation of Church and state. And the third—that the interior life of a Christian is private and separate from a public life of citizenship.

The first text about the poor is found in a story about Jesus, who in the final week of his life visits friends in Bethany, where during a meal, a woman anoints his feet with expensive ointment. Some are furious over the waste, but Jesus replies that the woman had done a beautiful thing, and says, “For you always have the poor with you, and when you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me.”⁴³ One does not have to be a professional scripture scholar to see that first, the text is primarily about Jesus and not about the poor; second, that the accurate translation of the Greek (okay, you would probably have to be a scholar of Greek to know this) is the present tense—“you have the poor with you”—and is not therefore a prediction of an unalterable economic state; and third, (but here you would need to be pretty familiar with the whole Bible to catch this next reference), that Jesus is quoting from *Deuteronomy* 15:11 in which it states that since there are poor people among the Jews, they will need to be generous to them so that “the needy will never be lacking in the land.” For these three reasons, the text about the poor cannot be a pretext for neglecting the poor.⁴⁴

The second text, about Caesar and God, is often interpreted in a way that admonishes priests to stay in the sanctuary, and speak only about a religion that has nothing to do with political matters. When Jesus asks his religious opponents for a coin and whose image is inscribed on it, he not only incriminates them for having in their possession a profane and idolatrous coin (the Romans claimed that Caesar was divine), but he also reminds them, literate Jews that they were, of the Genesis text that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. When Jesus instructs his opponents to give to Caesar what is his and to God what belongs to God, Hamm comments:

Thus, Caesar may currently govern the economic system, but the Creator is owner and governor of all—everything and everyone. To live as [an] image of God is to be steward of the divine property and live righteously the justice of the covenant—precisely what Jesus’s treacherous adversaries were refusing to do.⁴⁵

⁴² *Luke* 17:21

⁴³ *Matthew* 26:11, *Mark* 14:7, and *John* 12:8, *supra* n. 40.

⁴⁴ Hamm, *Dodging Faith’s Call*, *supra* n. 39, at 9.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 10.

The final text, the “kingdom of God is within you,” is unique to the gospel of Luke.⁴⁶ In the Greek, the “you” is in the plural. It would be better to translate the text as, “the kingdom of heaven is in your midst,” that is, acted out in our relationships in community, or it is “among you,” visible when a community exemplifies the kingdom in its deeds. Put in its context, this passage criticizes some Pharisees who are not truly committed to living the law that they exhorted others to live. Thus, properly understood, the kingdom is evident when a community acts in love.

There are other texts too that have lent themselves to a privatized and a non justice-oriented interpretation—texts such as the one where Jesus says that “my kingdom is not of this world.”⁴⁷ Suffice it here to say that to read into the New Testament a basis for the contemporary doctrine of the separation of Church and state, or a basis for a privatized form of discipleship, is to distort the meaning of the Scriptures.

If a Catholic exegete has provided us with a thoughtful commentary on New Testament texts relevant to our topic (some Protestant scholars would say much the same), what have other Catholics contributed to our topic? During February of this year, 55 Catholic Democrats in the House of Representatives made an important and unprecedented statement on how their Catholic faith affected their lives as politicians. Let me quote the beginning of their statement:

As Catholic Democrats in Congress, we are proud to be part of the living Catholic tradition—a tradition that promotes the common good, expresses a consistent moral framework for life and highlights the need to provide a collective safety net to those individuals in society who are most in need. As legislators, in the U.S. House of Representatives, we work every day to advance respect for life and the dignity of every human being. We believe that government has moral purpose.⁴⁸

They focus on “the heart of Catholic social teaching,” which they describe as “helping the poor and disadvantaged, protecting the most vulnerable among us and ensuring that all Americans of every faith are given meaningful opportunities to share in the blessings of this great country.”⁴⁹ They desire to change the current political debate since in their judgment it “often fails to reflect and encompass the depth and complexity of these issues.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Luke 17:21.

⁴⁷ John 18:36.

⁴⁸ Rosa L. DeLauro et al., *Statement by 55 Catholic House Democrats*, 35 *Origins* 38, 635-636 (Mar. 23, 2006).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 636.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

Two of their comments, however, provoked a response from three members of Cardinal McCarrick's Task Force. The first is their statement on abortion: "We envision a world in which every child belongs to a loving family and agree with the Catholic Church about the value of human life and the undesirability of abortion—we do not celebrate its practice."⁵¹ The second statement recognizes "the church's role in providing moral leadership," but at the same time acknowledges "the tension that comes with being in disagreement with the church in some areas."⁵² They "seek the church's guidance and assistance but believe also in the primacy of conscience."⁵³

Not surprisingly, in less than two weeks, three leaders within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to their statement, applauding the Democrats' effort to bring together "their faith and their policy choices."⁵⁴ Affirming the importance of caring for the poor and pursuing justice and promoting peace, the bishops also reaffirmed that abortion is the violation of the most fundamental human right—"the right to life that is inherent in all human beings and that grounds every other right we possess."⁵⁵ Therefore, conclude the bishops, it is not enough to work to reduce the number of abortions; legislators and all Catholics must work to end abortions. To say as the legislators had, that they "do not celebrate" abortions, was, in the bishops' view, as well as in my view, an inaccurate expression of what a Catholic's position on abortion should be.⁵⁶ I believe the bishops are right on this, but skip over the complexities that face the legislators in making practical decisions as how best to go about achieving the end of abortion. In my lecture two years ago, I tried to make clear what I thought about the various positions Catholic legislators stake out on abortion. I wrote:

[T]o the extent that a persuasive case in a pluralistic society can be made for a teaching of Catholic morality, Catholics may well hope that such a teaching (e.g., against abortion) may be translated into civil law. Therefore, it is not sufficient for US Catholic legislators to say about abortion only that they are personally opposed to it; they are also obliged to find ways, even while supporting the current legislation that protects the constitutional right of women to abortion, to lessen the number of abortions, if not eliminate them completely.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ William H. Keeler et al., *Responsibilities of Catholics in Public Life*, 35 *Origins* 40, 658-660, 659 (Mar. 23, 2006).

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ DeLauro et al., *supra* n. 48, at 636.

⁵⁷ Heft, *supra* n. 1, at 270 (footnote omitted).

The statement by the Catholic Democrats admirably addresses the issues related to decreasing the number of abortions, but does not go far enough in only saying that they “do not celebrate” abortion.⁵⁸ I can only imagine the amount of extended heated debate that took place over how to phrase their position on abortion. In this regard, it should be noted, that several of the signatories have been consistently, publicly, and staunchly opposed to abortion.

On the second issue—the matter of the primacy of conscience—the bishops reiterate traditional Church teaching and remind the legislators that, according to Catholic doctrine, “conscience must be consistent with fundamental moral principles.”⁵⁹ They add then that “all Catholics are obliged to shape our consciences in accord with the moral teaching of the Church.”⁶⁰ I understand the prohibition of abortion to be a fundamental moral principle. I also think it is necessary for all Catholics, and for Catholic legislators, to agree with the Church’s moral teaching on abortion. But I also find it not so clear when it comes to how best to translate that moral teaching into civil law in a society where only one-fourth of the population is Catholic, and when Catholics themselves are not all of one mind on how to deal with *Roe v. Wade*.⁶¹ It might also have helped if the bishops had mentioned that in Vatican II’s document on religious freedom, Catholics are asked to form their consciences *in the light of* rather than *according to* the moral teachings of the Church.⁶² The bishops at Vatican II chose to emphasize the phrase, *in the light of*, precisely in order to stress the degree of personal reflection that is needed in the formation of the adult conscience. Conscience formation is an ongoing process that takes place within the Church community itself. Over the years, I have taught my students that they alone must make up their minds, but they should never make them up alone. I also believe that in their response to the legislators, the three bishops would have been more helpful if they had recognized explicitly the complexities Catholic legislators face. Perhaps, they could have initiated a dialogue with at least some of them before they crafted their response. Simply repeating Catholic teaching on the morality of abortion and on the correct formation of conscience may not have been that helpful.

In summary, I am saying here that not only should Catholic legislators be clearer about their adherence to the Church teaching on abortion, but also the bishops should be more helpful to legislators by acknowledging the complexities of the decisions they need to make on legislative matters related to moral issues. It is worth asking here—and not only as an aside—whether parishes, particularly those in which Catholic

⁵⁸ DeLauro et al., *supra* n. 48, at 636.

⁵⁹ Keeler et al., *supra* n. 54, at 659.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

⁶² Vatican II, *supra* n. 22, at 807-809.

politicians are members, and especially Catholic universities, might play a useful role in helping to broaden and shape the terms of the debate.

Finally, Catholic Democratic Senate candidate Robert P. Casey Jr., who is seeking to unseat Catholic Republican Senator Rick Santorum, gave a major address one week ago at Catholic University of America in which he defended the place of religion in politics. Citing a statement by Obama, Casey said “liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant.”⁶³ He said that America “must be a country dedicated to the common good,”⁶⁴ which he believes is “built on a foundation of social justice.”⁶⁵ He praised the statement of his 55 Democratic colleagues in the House who focused on “the underlying factors that often lead women to choose abortion.”⁶⁶ He had sharp words for conservatives who focus on abortion but “then let our children suffer in broken schools,” and added that “we can’t claim to be pro-life at the same time we are cutting support for Medicaid, Head Start[,] or the Women, Infants and Children’s Program.”⁶⁷

One cannot read the addresses of Barack Obama and Robert Casey, or the statement of the 55 Catholic Democrats, without seeing a pattern. They all argue that religion should have a role in politics. They all argue that to exercise that role, religion must embrace the common good, especially the needs of the poor. And they all argue against the ways in which the two major political parties have dichotomized what should be an integrated moral agenda in social policy.⁶⁸ One may dismiss these statements and addresses as simply tactics employed by the Democratic Party to overcome its *religion problem*. But I think such a dismissal is mistaken. Rather, I see in them a genuine effort to articulate elements of a distinctive Catholic contribution to our understanding of the relationship of religion and politics. Another Catholic Democrat, Mark Shields, a long time journalist and convener of television’s popular political show “The Capital Gang,” described the Catholic contribution to politics by comparing

⁶³ Alan Cooperman, *Senate Candidate Speaks of Life, Faith*, Washington Post A03 (Sept. 15, 2006) (quoting Barack Obama). See Robert P. Casey, Jr., Speech, *Restoring America’s Moral Compass: Leadership and the Common Good* (Cath. U. Columbus Sch. of L., D.C., Sept. 14, 2006)(available at <http://www.bobcasey.com/news/speech/view/?id=158>).

⁶⁴ Cooperman, *supra* n. 63 (quoting Robert Casey).

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.* (quoting Robert Casey).

⁶⁷ *Id.* (quoting Robert Casey).

⁶⁸ Cardinal Bernardin took a major step in overcoming that dichotomization when he proposed, in several variations over several years, his “consistent ethic of life.” He made it clear that there was an inner connection between the Church’s teachings against abortion, capital punishment, and war, even though the magisterial opposition to capital punishment is relatively recent, and the possibility of a war of self defense under strict limitations is still acknowledged. The “consistent ethic of life” makes it difficult for any Catholic to identify fully with either the Republican or the Democratic platforms as they currently exist. See Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Sheed and Ward 1988).

the words of two representative American politicians—Ronald Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt. The Gipper asked: “Are *you* better off than you were four years ago?” FDR put it differently: “The measure of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, but whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” For the Catholic, I believe, the question ought to be: Are *we* better off? Are the strong among us more just? Are the weak among us more secure?⁶⁹

The Catholic moral tradition has been hammered out over nearly two thousand years. Some of that tradition has maintained a clear and continuous focus on the needs of the poor, the importance of the natural law tradition, and on the priority that should be given to the spiritual life over material possessions. Yet it has also evolved and even had to change in important ways: for example, on the issue of slavery—the role of women and religious freedom. In recent decades it has been enriched by greater attention to the international problems posed by the realities of poverty, militarism, and globalization. In the formation of a Catholic’s conscience, a familiarity with these ongoing social analyses and moral reflections will help to avoid narrow nationalism, as well as enrich reflection on the domestic problems we face as a country.

We began with some reflections on texts from the New Testament and argued that they do not admit of an interpretation that would sharply separate one’s spiritual life from one’s public responsibilities. In his best selling book, *In His Steps*, the nineteenth century Protestant minister and novelist, Charles M. Sheldon, posed a question that stirred his congregation to great acts of love and concern for others.⁷⁰ He asked, “What would Jesus do?”⁷¹ But answering that question is not that easy. As maverick Catholic Garry Wills put it recently,

They [the disciples] never knew what Jesus was going to do next. He could round on Peter and call him “Satan.” He could refuse to receive his mother when she asked to see him. He might tell his followers that they are unworthy of him if they do not hate their mother and their father. He might kill pigs by the hundreds. He might whip people out of church precincts.⁷²

⁶⁹ Raymond A. Schroth, *Talking with Mark Shields*, 14 Natl. Catholic Rptr. 13 (Sept. 23, 2005).

⁷⁰ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*, in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room & In His Steps* 127 (C. Hugh Holman ed., The Odyssey Press, Inc. 1966).

⁷¹ *Id.* at 139.

⁷² Gary Wills, *Christ Among the Partisans*, 154 N.Y. Times § 4 (Apr. 9, 2006).

In other words, if one's goal were to be esteemed and respectable, doing exactly what Jesus did would cause quite a disturbance.⁷³ Wills makes a good point about the importance of Christian witness. But in the same short op-ed piece, he badly misinterprets some of the very New Testament texts we have already examined. He falls into the privatizing and spiritualizing of the teachings of Jesus that Hamm so effectively criticizes. For example, Wills understands Jesus, in uttering to give to Caesar and to God what belongs to each, as the "original proponent of a separation of church and state."⁷⁴ He cites Jesus's statement in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew* 6:6) that one should go to one's room and pray in private as a clear indication that Jesus's "religion was an internal matter of the heart."⁷⁵ Or to take just one more example, he cites the text in which Jesus says "my kingdom is not of this world,"⁷⁶ but interprets this text as meaning that "Jesus brought no political message or program."⁷⁷ Hamm points out that the Greek would be better translated, "My kingdom is not from this world," to underscore that his authority transcends that of Pilate's, before whom he stands.⁷⁸ Wills argues so strongly against any form of *Christian politics* that he robs Christianity of its legitimate role in influencing, not coercing, the political order so that it serves all the people, the great and the small alike. I don't believe that Catholicism has a political theology, but I do believe that Catholicism has important theological insights for politics.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recommends, as the normal exercise of responsible citizenship, cooperating with duly elected civic officials.⁷⁹ But that cooperation might be withheld for good reasons. It states, "[t]hose subject to authority should regard those in authority as representatives of God, who has made them stewards of his gifts."⁸⁰ But then the text continues, "[t]heir loyal collaboration includes the right, and at times the duty, to voice their just criticism of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and to the good of the community."⁸¹ Public criticism and political action aimed at changing the social order can be obligatory for Catholics, initiatives that may make them less than esteemed and respected in the eyes of those whom the current political situation privileges.

⁷³ I am not sure what led Wills to write this op-ed piece, but it may have been the statement by the 55 Catholic Democrats.

⁷⁴ Wills, *supra* n. 72.

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *John* 18:36.

⁷⁷ Wills, *supra* n. 72.

⁷⁸ Hamm, *Faith's Call to Justice*, *supra* n. 39, at 18-19.

⁷⁹ U.S. Catholic Conference, Inc., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Paulist Press 1994).

⁸⁰ *Id.* at ¶ 2238 (footnote omitted).

⁸¹ *Id.* The Catholic doctrine of conscience also grounds one's refusal to obey: "Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community." *Id.* at ¶ 2242. See also Hamm, *Faith's Call to Justice*, *supra* n. 39, at 20.

Conclusion

Finally, by way of conclusion, I ask, what should we be doing to move these issues of religion and politics along in a constructive way? Barack Obama's personal gifts are surely natural but they also had to be cultivated—what are we doing to recognize and cultivate such gifts in our own community? What do we do to help students see the U.S. political system in a broad perspective beyond socializing them into partisan politics? Is political awareness just another lifestyle preference—I like basketball, you like tennis, and she likes video games? Or is political awareness part of the obligation of a university-educated citizen, especially one at a Catholic university that should recognize how great an impact political choices have on human flourishing? How do we help students, indeed—how do we help ourselves—to recognize and tolerate complexity without lapsing into paralysis, or using religion as an excuse for quietism, or just as bad, as a vehicle for partisan politics? In all of this, I speak especially to you students here present this afternoon who will have to figure out how it is that each of you is called to combine the roles of disciple and citizen. I do not believe that the way in which the two major political parties have divided up the issues fits well with what any thinking Christian should embrace.

A careful study of history shows, sadly, that the Church has gotten a lot wrong over the years concerning politics and the use of force. But in the twentieth century, there have been sustained attempts to articulate a vision of human flourishing in the modern world, rooted in the gospels but embodied in our own time and place—and not aspiring arrogantly to prematurely declare itself to be the *kingdom*. The world desperately needs people in this very hall to get to work at figuring out how to make this more real in our generation. May we rise to meet this challenge!

James L. Heft, S.M.

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Annual Faith and Culture Lecture

University of Dayton