

A lecture delivered at the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life

University of California, Santa Barbara

By Congressman David Price -

It is a genuine pleasure to join you today and to be asked to contribute to this distinguished tenth anniversary lecture series for the Walter H. Capps Center for the study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life. I knew Walter slightly when we were both at Yale Divinity School forty-five years ago; he was a graduate student and thus traveled in somewhat higher intellectual circles than I. [Congresswoman] Lois [Capps] and I took classes together, and Walter's brother Don and I lived on the same dormitory hall. Because of that earlier association, and because of the roughly parallel tracks of our careers, I followed Walter's political ventures with great interest. He and I came to the House together in the class of 1996. I had served four previous terms and had made a comeback after being voted out as part of the 1994 Gingrich revolution. Walter had won election on his second try in one of the most competitive districts in the country.

It is a special pleasure for [my wife] Lisa and me and our daughter Karen to be here with Lois Capps, who has become a dear friend and treasured colleague over these past ten years. Lois is a member with whom I share many values and priorities. We have been able to give effect to those in our service on the House Democracy Assistance Commission, which engages and supports our fellow parliamentarians in developing democracies; in efforts to promote Middle East peacemaking and to encourage more constructive American engagement in that region; and in promoting among our colleagues the kind of discussion of the faith-politics intersection that I hope we can engage in here today.

In thinking about today's assignment, I was struck by the tribute to Walter Capps voiced by one of his former students, Wendy Wright, in the forum held here on May 10. She was speaking explicitly of his legacy as a scholar of religious studies, but what struck me - - and I believe would strike anyone who knew and worked with Walter - - was the parallel with the way he approached any undertaking and life in general:

His contagious fascination with the lived experience of religiosity, his self-reflective concern for the interiority of that experience, his singular sensitivity to the deep questions, his delight in the multitude of ways that religious questing takes place, his disciplined attention to the dynamics of the human heart that soars to ultimate concerns . . . his resonance with those searing questions that will not rest and the study of which is never fully exhausted, his integrity that honored the seriousness of academic questions as well the imperative of religious questing, his playfulness that refused to make idols of theory yet valued theory for the intelligibility it could supply . . . . 1

I will return to some of this more explicitly later. For now, I simply want to echo this tribute to the qualities of mind and heart that have shaped Walter Capps' life and legacy.

Our topic today, "Faith Informing Politics," is one to which Walter gave a great deal of attention, particularly in his interpretation of what he called the "new religious right." Lois and I have witnessed and participated in another turn in that road, particularly since the 2004 elections. Those elections displayed a strong connection between professed religiosity and Republican voting. This has prompted a great deal of concern and soul-searching among those of more progressive religious and political views.

All of this seems both familiar and ironic to those of us who came of age in the sixties or, indeed, partook of the ferment of those years at Yale Divinity School. Familiar, because the current discussion resurrects questions about the relation of faith and civilization which our mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr, explored as a "perennial" area of "Christian perplexity."<sup>2</sup> Ironic, because it has sometimes placed us in the surreal position of denying that we are aggressive secularists.

Speaking personally, I regard my undergraduate and divinity school years, which coincided with the early civil rights movement and culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as the time when my political and religious identities were decisively shaped. Nowadays, religious conservatives claim the banner of faith-based politics for themselves, and their political leaders not only ignore the religious and moral roots of progressive politics but often portray the entire Democratic Party as hostile to the faith connection.

How has it come to this? Some of the religious groups that we criticized in the 1960's for their individualistic and other-worldly approach to faith have become politically mobilized, and their cultural conservatism has become a key component of Republican politics. "Mainstream" religious communities have often seemed confused or complacent. Some have mistakenly

assumed, reacting to the excesses of the religious right, that the separation of church and state requires a separation of faith and politics. Some progressive politicians have even become reluctant to tell their own personal stories or to advocate their positions in moral terms. Among many mainstream congregants, nothing has ever quite matched the clarity and conviction of civil rights, and there has been a reluctance to take on religious conservatives in either religious or political forums.

Some of this confusion and complacency are now lifting, and it is not just on the religious and political "left" that discussion has intensified. There seems to be a renewed awareness across the spectrum that the faith-politics nexus requires searching examination, and that this cannot and should not be mainly a matter of seeking political advantage. Both our faith and our politics require the exploration of the wellsprings of our own vision for society and of the way our deepest values should shape public policy.

Today, I will focus on the passion that faith brings to politics, on how the translation from conviction to political action works and some of the pitfalls to which it is subject. I will argue that faith constrains even as it inspire us, leading us to limit political power and to stop well short of identifying our own causes with God's will. And finally I will reflect on how the discussion is going, based on the 2008 election season.

### Passionate Engagement<sup>3</sup>

The rediscovery by many Americans of the Hebrew prophets and their call for justice that "rolls down like waters" (Amos 5:24) had far-reaching political and religious significance in the 1960s. Many of us came to understand that the familiar compartmentalization of life, whereby people who were loving and generous in their personal relationships saw no contradiction in supporting laws and social practices that denied others their humanity, was ultimately untenable. The result was a new direction in public policy, charted by landmark civil rights statutes in 1964 and 1965.

While civil rights remains a paradigmatic case, the prophetic imperative to "do justice and love kindness" (Micah 6:8) speaks to much of our political life. It requires us to cut through the welter of policy detail and ask what government is doing in our name -- to subject military interventions to "just war" criteria, for example, or to evaluate governmental budgets as statements of moral priorities.

Faith inspires passionate engagement in the political arena, but that does not mean that it is always simple or straightforward to translate religious and moral convictions into social action. For one thing, our faith traditions themselves reveal diverse modes of engagement. Consider, for example, the biblical roles of prophet and peacemaker. While the psalmist extols the blessings of "kindred living together in unity" (133:1), Jeremiah rebukes those whose desire for peace leads to passivity in the face of evil. "From prophet to priest . . . they have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (6:13-14). The life of Jesus displays a similar tension. Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr., may find creative ways of reconciling the roles of prophet and peacemaker, but often people of faith will be called to differing, even contrasting, modes of engagement.

Passion must also employ reason. In the legislative arena the calculation of consequences is essential. One of the few times during my service in Congress that I have referred explicitly to my seminary background came in early 2007 during a caucus discussion of a Democratic proposal to put conditions and withdrawal deadlines on a supplemental appropriations bill on Iraq. One colleague stated that because the bill did not immediately defund the war he was not certain that he, as a former seminarian, could vote for it "in good conscience."

This prompted me to counter with the distinction, familiar from the first day of Ethics 101, between deontological and teleological theories of ethics, although I assure you I did not lay those exact terms on my colleagues! What, I asked, if the result of joining Republicans in a "no" vote, because our proposal fell short of liberal members' notion of perfection, was to bring it down? What if the consequence was to forfeit the best chance we might have for some time to compel a change in war policy? What if the result was to show fatal weakness and division and thus to compromise our longer-term prospects for taking foreign policy in a new direction? It was precisely "conscience," I said, that required us not merely to measure our bill against an ideal standard but to count the costs and calculate the consequences of defeat.

Passion and conviction are compatible with seeking common ground with those who come to politics from other backgrounds or perspectives - - indeed, they often require it. The happy experience of the civil rights movement and of many movements since, is that one can bring one's deepest convictions to political advocacy and at the same time ally with people whose theological and philosophical perspectives differ greatly and sometimes do not have conventional religious roots at all. This will often involve going beyond a specifically religious frame of reference, invoking the commonly held values and shared aspirations of the wider community. It also requires a willingness to "reason together," as opposed to viewing our religious convictions as debate-stoppers.

Religious conservatives sometimes portray the search for common ground as requiring them, as one of my colleagues put it, "to check my Christian beliefs at the public door." There is also a tendency to see the invoking of universal values as producing a mere "common denominator" that lacks specificity or force. That, I believe, greatly underestimates the power of the fundamental principles of our constitutional democracy, which have deep religious roots but also find broader resonance. Certainly it would have come as news to Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, as they invoked the Declaration of Independence to combat slavery and segregation, that making a universalistic appeal diluted their passion or the force of their argument.

What if such common ground is not to be found? Obviously, there are sectarian rules and observances that individuals and communities regard as binding, with no thought of extending them to the broader community. But the boundaries delineating what may legitimately be taken into the public arena are neither clear nor uncontroversial. Some politicians, for example, including many who are personally opposed to abortion on religious or moral grounds, argue against "imposing" such beliefs on society. Others regard that position as unjustifiably preempting legitimate political debate.

Or consider the issue of gay rights. Like abortion, gay rights evokes contrasting responses among religious communities. Many people of faith, for good reason, believe that gay relationships should be guided by the same moral standards of fidelity and mutual commitment that should guide heterosexual relationships. While the law cannot compel such values, neither should it stand in the way of their realization. Moreover, the denial of equal protection under the law to gays, which some rationalize in terms of religious belief, is likely to conflict with broadly shared principles such as civil liberty, nondiscrimination, and equal opportunity, which themselves have strong religious pedigrees.

So the best course is often to refrain from codifying a specific concept of personal morality, leaving the individual and communal expression of conscience free. But we cannot always resolve such matters simply by declaring them "off limits" for political debate. Those who oppose efforts to shape or sanction various aspects of personal morality will often need to challenge the proponents directly, within religious and other institutions of civil society as well as in the political arena.

Many questions surround the agenda for engagement - - not only what issues are best left free of governmental prescription but also how to prioritize the wide range of issues with implications for faith and morality. Religious communities often seem to talk past one another. Conservative groups focus on matters such as abortion and gay marriage, while liberals stress questions of

economic justice and war and peace. There is some convergence on pornography and gambling and, increasingly, environmental stewardship. All would do well to guard against the human tendency to address only those questions and heed only those teachings that we find convenient or comfortable.

Some selective judgment is inevitable, however, whether we are dealing with the codes of Leviticus or the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount. Much depends on how we read and understand the Bible - - referencing scriptural commands, for example, as opposed to heeding the admonitions throughout the prophets and the New Testament to attend less to the minutiae of the law and more to its "weightier matters. . . justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Relating faith and politics is not merely a matter of obeying commands; it requires ongoing efforts to mine the riches of our religious traditions and to apply them to new and challenging circumstances.

### Faith-based Constraints

Even as our faith prompts passionate engagement in the political arena, it also raises warnings and suggests constraints on the form and content of our advocacy. Two constraints written into the U.S. Constitution - - checks and balances among the major organs of government, and the First Amendment's twin prohibitions of the "establishment" of religion or the prevention of its "free exercise" - - have deep religious roots and continuing significance in terms of our understanding of human nature and religious liberty.

James Madison's reflections on the "interior structures of the government" reveal a persistent streak of Calvinism in this son of the Enlightenment:

[W]hat is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men . . . you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.<sup>4</sup>

This view, interpreted by Reinhold Niebuhr as a landmark expression of "Christian realism," must be distinguished from the more simplistic antipower ideology that persistently rears its

head in American politics. Government is hardly the only realm where power exists or can be abused; in fact, political power can be used to counter or control economic, military, or other kinds of power. We must attend not only to the dangers of strengthening a given organ of government but also to the powers and interests that might fill the vacuum if it is weakened. The realism rooted in our religious traditions provides an awareness of the presence of self-interest and self-seeking in all human endeavors, the necessity to use power judiciously as we pursue the common good, and the need for check and safeguards as we recognize the vulnerability of power in all realms to distortion and abuse.

The First Amendment also embodies religiously-inspired constraints on engagement. By no means does it require a strict "privatization" of faith. But it does provide certain ground rules for relating religion to government. Religious conservatives often chafe at these ground rules and treat them as a secular imposition. People of faith need to understand and insist that, on the contrary, the First Amendment has deep and firm religious roots. A brief look at the lineage of the establishment clause will reveal that Roger Williams and other proponents of church-state separation were far more focused on the church's integrity than on the state's prerogatives. What was and still is at stake is not only civil liberty but also religious faithfulness.

The First Amendment and the tension between the establishment and free exercise clauses have been at issue in debates over President Bush's "faith-based initiative." Such initiatives - - congregationally sponsored HUD housing for the elderly, for example, and Meals on Wheels - - flourished in my district many years before the Bush administration. I thought Democrats should have been more vocal in welcoming the President to the cause. But there was also good reason to voice concern about the ground rules. Religious organizations have historically taken pains - -often by administering their social services through a legally distinct entity - - to avoid using federal funds for sectarian purposes and to ensure against discrimination in hiring and the choice of beneficiaries. This is what Bush sought to alter, and it helps explain the difficulties the initiative encountered in the Senate and the courts.

Finally, our religious traditions teach us humility, and that too should shape and constrain our politics. This is the point of the familiar story of Abraham Lincoln's response during the Civil War to a clergyman who expressed the hope that the Lord was on the side of the Union (in other words, "God Bless America"). "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right," Lincoln said. "But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."<sup>5</sup>

This anecdote, like Lincoln's masterful second inaugural address, draws on a religious understanding central to the Jewish and Christian faiths: our own will and striving are always

subject to God's judgment, even - - perhaps especially - - when we are most confident we are doing God's will. This does not mean that we engage less vigorously; after all, Lincoln was relentlessly pursuing a military victory. But he did voice what Reinhold Niebuhr termed a "religious reservation:" a recognition that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone and a refusal to presume an absolute identification between his own cause God's will.

"Like 'God-fearing' people of all ages," Niebuhr wrote, we "are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire."<sup>6</sup> Note that, once again, the most powerful argument against religious and political pretension is not secular but theological. Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.

### The Scene in 2008

I hope these thoughts are suggestive as to the paths down which the faith-politics discussion might take us. The current election season displays some hopeful signs but has produced its share of diversions and detours.

Each of the three candidates still in the race has demonstrated an increased openness to revealing their personal faith narrative. John McCain, who in the past has been reluctant to talk about spiritual matters, has brought his personal faith to the fore in recounting his POW ordeal. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have gone much farther in relating their religious and moral convictions to the issues they would face as president. This has been facilitated by forums organized by the Sojourners organization and CNN's "Compassion Forum" seven weeks ago.

The questions posed at those forums often reflected a lack of common understanding as to what kind of information was pertinent or helpful. Clinton and/or Obama were quizzed, for example, about their favorite Bible stories, the details of their prayer life, when they had felt the Holy Spirit, and whether God created the world in six days. Time magazine's Amy Sullivan, whose book *The Party Faithful* urges Democrats to engage on matters of faith more directly, suggested after the Compassion Forum that this line of questioning wasn't quite what she has in mind:

If the two Democrats hadn't tossed the occasional "When I'm President" into their answers, it would have been easy to forget that they're running to be commander-in-chief and not national theologian. As it was, they each at least had the good grace to look uncomfortable when the questioning veered away from policy and principles into piety.

Their discomfort, Sullivan went on to note, was all the more striking because both Clinton and Obama have demonstrated a willingness to talk about their faith that stands out among their Democratic colleagues. "Their ease and familiarity with religious language and communities," she observed, "surpasses that of most members of their party, not to mention the GOP nominee John McCain."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, that ability and willingness to engage in ways that are both pertinent and helpful was evident at many points during these forums. Both candidates addressed the need for people of faith to find common ground with diverse others and to invoke commonly held values; they demonstrated a discriminating understanding of church-state separation; they brought religious and moral considerations to bear on a number of issues including poverty, international health programs, torture, abortion, and euthanasia; and both invoked the story I just told about Lincoln: Obama in response to a question as to whether God was on the side of US troops, Clinton when asked whether God wanted her to be president. I particularly commend to you Obama's keynote address to the Call for Renewal conference in 2006.

So the discussion has advanced in important ways - - but then there is the matter of Rev. John Hagee, whose endorsement John McCain sought and received, and Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's long-time pastor. Both pastors have had their more incendiary statements broadcast widely, and both have now been denounced by the candidates. This, too, we are bound to say, is not quite what we advocates of engagement had in mind. Both Hagee and Wright have tested the political limits of the faith connection, not merely in the extremity of their messages nor in their close identification with a presidential candidate, but in their combination of the two.

They have tested the limits in another sense as well. When Senator Clinton was asked in the Compassion Forum why "a loving God allows innocent people to suffer," it was one of those moments - - although she dealt with it gamely - - when the forum seemed to veer off course, into theological realms unrelated to fitness for office. But what would you think upon hearing this view of how God acts in history?

All hurricanes are acts of God, because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that.<sup>8</sup>

That from John Hagee. Or consider this from Jeremiah Wright, when asked about his comment after 9/11 that "America's chickens are coming home to roost." "To quote the Bible," he said:

"Be not deceived. God is not mocked. For whatsoever you sow, that you also shall reap."<sup>9</sup>

Now these views represent dubious theology, to put it mildly, and one would hope that religious communities and people of faith can figure that out without relying on theological musings from their presidential candidates. But to say the views are extreme is not to say they can be written off as irrelevant. I do not believe we would want someone with these views of God's agency anywhere near the levers of national power. And I suppose we are now on notice that the line between the moral and religious views that are relevant to performance in office, and those which are not, is not as bright as we perhaps thought it was.

The case of Rev. Wright raises a further question which is essential for people of faith to face, even as we criticize the way Wright himself handled it. You can think of it as the question of patriotism, of how one loves one's country, and it is a way of summing up much of what I have said today. In the days following Rev. Wright's National Press Club appearance - - where, incidentally, he brushed off a question about his feelings toward America simply by referring to his years in the military - - I referred often to an aphorism about patriotism I first heard from Bill Coffin in the Yale Chapel years ago. "There are three kinds of patriots," he said, "two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers [of their country] and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world."<sup>10</sup>

This is the kind of patriotism - - loyalty to our country, coupled with a determination to mend its flaws - - on which America continues to depend. It is not a monopoly of people of faith, but people of faith have a special obligation to seek a just society and to resist political arrogance and pretension. And it is here, in closing, that I want to return to the teaching and the example of Walter Capps. I am relying here on Walter's reflections on the work of conservative theologian Francis Schaeffer, with the help of Robert Orsi's paper from last month's forum.

After giving Schaeffer full and fair explication, Walter drew an insightful parallel between Schaeffer's pessimistic and censorious view and the world-denial of the early Gnostics. What Irenaeus attested to against the Gnostics, he said, must be attested to again: "That which

deserves to be improved, and perhaps needs to be transformed, must first be acknowledged, and must always be affirmed." Within the biblical tradition, Walter further noted, "the effective prophets . . . did more than cast judgment: they also offered a redemptive proposal, to assist those under judgment to find some compelling way out."<sup>1</sup>

These words reflect not only Walter Capps' historical interpretations but also his personal bearing and character: world-affirming, empathetic, hopeful, pained by the world's folly and injustice, but convinced that persuasion and political action could make a difference. His example can inspire and guide us as we take our faith and conviction into the political arena, carrying on "a lover's quarrel with our country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world."

## NOTES

1 Wendy M. Wright, "The Legacy of Walter H. Capps," May 8, 2008.

2 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 2.

3 The following two sections are adapted from David E. Price, "Faith Engaging Politics: Passion and Constraint," *Reflections*, 94 (Fall, 2007), pp. 65-68.

4 *Federalist*, no. 51.

5 Francis Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Herd and Houghton, 1867), p. 282.

6 Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), p. 173. See also William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Second Inaugural: A Study in Political Ethics* (Bloomington, IN: The Poynter Center, 1980).

7 Amy Sullivan, "The Dems' Delicate Dance on Faith," Time, April 15, 2008.

8 "Fresh Air" interview, National Public Radio, September 18, 2006.

9 Remarks at the National Press Club, April 28, 2008.

10 William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 84.

11 Walter H. Capps, The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism, and Politics (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p. 88; see Robert Orsi, "The Democratic Impulse: The Contribution of Walter H. Capps to Religious Studies," May 8, 2008.