Principles and Practice: The Dilemma of Faith versus Politics

The world, as always, is in a constant state of change, and Catholic Christians increasingly find themselves adrift in a sea of complex choices which often do not offer easy solutions. The question of faith in relation to politics has always been confusing and controversial for many. Yet the issue surpasses theological and philosophical speculation when we are forced to face it head-on in the major religious and political sectors of our lives. To integrate our spiritual understandings into our public lives and practice them consistently is, admittedly, much easier said than done—what we actually do and what we should do are often very different things. But in a world plagued by many kinds of day-to-day conflict, it is essential that we revisit this issue.

Our modern culture tends to take extremely polarized views of the roles which faith and politics play. Either it is seen that faith and politics are two completely separate entities, or they are the same. Both of these views are fallacious, and generally do not contribute to the wellbeing and understanding of society. We cannot view sociopolitical and religious responsibility as entirely separate spheres, fundamentally incompatible with each other, else we become caught between two dueling notions and doomed to inaction. Although well-intended, the misplaced reasoning that faith and politics must remain entirely detached from each other is founded on the fundamental assumption that these things are capable of being separated. This is not completely true; in some ways, faith is politics—the views that form inner spirituality are bound to emerge in outer actions, in political choices as well as in day-to-day rituals. Simultaneously, the belief that faith can never be separated
from politics is equally as misleading. A basic respect for the dignity and differences of individuals who do not follow the same doctrines is always necessary.

In order to understand the importance of balance between faith and politics, it is necessary to examine the consequences that occur when the focus is skewed on only one facet of their relationship. In his book, *Young India*, Gandhi named "Politics without Principle" as one of the Seven Social Sins, among six other concepts he believed to be obstacles for modern society. This statement is a clear way to understand the process through which political power is often abused. Throughout the world, the continued existence of dictatorships and juntas, instances of genocide, wars and violence, and suppression of free speech demonstrates to us the severe consequences of political action without ethical base. Dr. Stephen R. Covey, author of the bestselling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, reaffirmed Gandhi's assertion, saying, "If there is no principle, there is no true north, nothing you can depend upon." This is the essential duty faith must perform in regard to politics for the Catholic citizen.

The rise of Nazism and Hitler's brutal crimes against humanity are explicit examples of politics without principle. The concepts inherent in political fascism on a broader scale bear striking resemblance to religious fascism on a personal scale. Self-centered internal imbalance is exactly what Catholic Christians must focus on in their attempts to reach a rational agreement between their religious and political lives. For to ignore dichotomies within personal belief and practice is to render useless one's potential to bring about solid change through action. The realities of the religious and political world reflect the beliefs
of countless individuals. Yet without a concrete base of action to realize them, abstract beliefs become meaningless. To enact positive change, we must examine even our smallest thought processes in light of our ethical principles, and formulate a plan for action.

The responsibility for tragedies inflicted by political practice without principle lies not only on those directly involved in perpetrating them, but also partially with individuals containing potential to oppose them but who lack the fundamental principles necessary to take action. In his essay, *Our Global Family*, the XIV Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, states, "Responsibility does not only lie with the leaders of our countries or with those who have been appointed or elected to do a particular job. It lies with each of us individually. Peace, for example, starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us." As the world becomes smaller and our communities more diverse, we must become aware of this and strive to embody the essential meaning of the love and understanding inherent in Christ's teachings, especially when we encounter others who believe differently. This respect must remain equally present in the political arena. It is imperative to apply these ideas to how we approach the modern world. In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama stated, "...We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers. America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." Coexistence, in many ways, is peace, but coexistence need not require the elimination of the differences that make us unique. In this way, faith and politics remain realms separated in some respects but more deeply unified in the principal foundation they share.
Alternatively, unrestrained religious convictions are as equally treacherous as political action without an ethical base. Once religious dogma is established as law, the underlying principles of doctrine are no longer practiced out of free will, but instead degrade to mere rules relying on enforcement. Catholic Christians must let the truth of their principles become self-evident in the changes they incur. In many cases, the dogma and doctrine of a given religion, when implemented as such, stifles the individual's conscience which serves as the true foundation for moral action. As well, the sense of segregation that militant adherence to dogma produces ignores a fundamental purpose of religion as a means for individuals to successfully function within a larger community. Humans are social beings, but a misplaced sense of isolation, whether intentional or unintentional, can do much harm. Through such isolation it becomes easier to disregard the impacts which actions have on others, and harder to see others as equal human beings.

The teachings of Christ can also be examined for guidance in this area. In the Gospels, Christ saved a woman accused of adultery from death by stoning by saying that whoever was sinless amongst her accusers could throw the first stone, directly challenging the temple authorities because he felt they had essentially missed the point of the Law of Moses (John 8:7). When questioned about the validity of taxation, he noted that it was Caesar's face on the currency. Jesus then replied that it was necessary to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," calling essentially for some degree of separation between religious belief and political practice (Mark 12:17).
In order to make ethical decisions that embody a combined understanding of faith and politics, a sense of religious identity and understanding of the principles of the "natural law" and moral law must be applied to one's political and social existence. However, Catholic Christians and other individuals with genuine inclinations to righteous action find themselves searching for the most fundamental principle that governs our morality.

According to clause 1956 in Article I. Section I. of "God's Salvation: Law and Grace", the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that, "The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men." This is consistent with the idea that religious principles must underlie political action to unify us, and dogma and doctrine, while important, should not be used to separate us.

St. Augustine asked the same question, and concluded that we can better comprehend God's natural law as the inner understanding from which righteous action emerges, from which even the Bible takes its cue: "Where then are these rules written, if not in the book of that light we call the truth? In it is written every just law; from it the law passes into the heart of the man who does justice... The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid." Augustine's depiction of God's universal principles, the natural law, as the "light of understanding" demonstrates that the true authority of these principles stems not from our external awareness of a set of "moral rules", but from our innermost nature as humans."
An understanding of the universality of the principal “light of understanding” can offer guidance in the modern world. Once any institution strays from the foundational principles it shares mutually with its adherents, it should understandably lose their allegiance. This is as true for Catholic Christianity as it is for any other religion, or in regard to the American government. In *Civil Disobedience*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.” In other words, the individual’s principles form the basis for the State’s, and this is acknowledged accordingly. As citizens of both a free society and of the world, we often find the dilemma of the imbalance between faith and politics thrust upon us, and more seriously the misuse of these notions in the governments of our societies.

To suppose, opposite of the emphasis on religious doctrine as law, that one can separate one’s innermost beliefs from oneself when making political choices that have the potential to affect others is illogical. Even a society as secular as America functions, fundamentally, on the belief and trust its citizens have in the security, integrity, and principles that shape and govern its systems. Thus, it may be said that belief is not entirely separable from action; but neither does it need to ruthlessly dictate action. Action stems from a conscious assessment of belief; belief is the foundation of action. That said, an integration of any particular religious dogma and doctrine into public law would draw attention away from the importance of the universal, underlying principles. Once the potential for abuse of the concepts of faith and politics is understood, it becomes clear that the most effective
relationship between faith and politics is one of reasoned balance, and not the conceptions to which they are too often assigned—that they must be entirely separated or entirely unified.

What I propose, and what I have come to understand through my own experience as the most effective and realistic way to succeed in retaining both religious and political integrity, is a unified comprehension of faith and politics that embodies itself in meaningful action. Faith influences and assists politics, and occurrences in politics challenge and shape faith. In theory, the two not only keep each other in check, but are mutually beneficial. We must thus move away from the modern tendency to establish religion as politics, or politics as a religion, but to practice more thoroughly and completely religious foundational principles through our sociopolitical interactions in a way that benefits both us as individuals and the larger human community within which we live. This is the true meaning of the duty of citizenship. Understanding the relationship between faith and politics in this manner allows us the power, as Catholic Christians, to transform the world in a positive manner without compromising the beliefs central to our existence.


 Refer to: "Text of President Barack Obama’s inaugural address." *Yahoo! News*, 21 Jan. 2009
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