

## Varieties of Religious Experience in Public

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When a Quaker rises to speak, he generally has a conviction that he has a message to share. And this is generally so for me even when I've been asked to speak. Usually I find I have something to say.

Today is different, however. Forgive me if I think out loud a little, more than a little unsure of my conclusions.

How should we carry our religious beliefs into the political realm? That's the question. Or perhaps the question is whether we should we carry our religious beliefs into the public realm? I'm pretty sure that the answer to that second question is yes, so how should we?

I'm sure that's an important question, and I've settled into some conclusions about it. But these conclusions are far from certainties. I want to think out loud about an important question to which I find myself returning over and over again.

It's awkward not to be certain, especially about this matter, because all around us are people who are certain. And these are people who have come to different conclusions.

We live in a world in which many, many people have come to believe that they should carry their religious beliefs fully into the political realm.

We hear people certain that they know what God prescribes about:  
What people should eat and drink;  
About intimate relationships;  
About right practices in worship.  
We could all make quite a list.

And we hear people insist that the full force of law, and the full might of armies should be used to compel and coerce others to do what they believe God prescribes.

This far I agree with them. What God asks us to do, we should do always and without exception. Being faithful to God isn't something we should do on some occasions and not others. And it isn't something we should do in some places and not others.

So of course we should carry our religious convictions into the political realm. In public, in the political sphere, each one of us needs to be as faithful and as accountable to God as anywhere else in our lives.

The difficult question is what does God ask us to do?

And that question is more difficult in the political sphere because it is especially in the political sphere that we are tempted into thinking that what I expect of myself I should expect of others.

We are tempted to the view that what I think is what others should think.

And to the further view that what I do is what others should do.

This is very tempting. If what I do and think is what God asks me to do and think, how could God not be asking the same thing of others—all others? How could it not be my responsibility to help others think and do the right thing as I understand God has instructed me? And how could it not be my responsibility to insist, with all the means at my disposal, that others think and do the right thing as I understand God has instructed me.

And shouldn't one of the "means at my disposal" for "insisting that others think and do the right thing" be the best efforts of the national government? Shouldn't the government be used to require that everyone do and say the right things?

As I say, this is a very tempting argument. All around me (and all around you) are people whose talk and whose actions appear to flow from this understanding. And yet as I try to walk down the road of this argument, step by step, I lose conviction. It doesn't seem like the right view of how I (or we) should carry our religious convictions into the political realm.

My thinking out loud today has to do with trying to make sense of my doubts.

Start by noticing one awkward fact. If it weren't so tragic we'd call it an irony. Those with the viewpoint I've just sketched agree that we should use the coercive power of governments to get people to do what they believe God asks us to do and think, but they do not agree on just precisely what they believe God asks us to do and think. And that leads us into a world of anger and violence.

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In trying to sort out how we should carry our religious beliefs into the public realm, I am drawn back, regularly to the Bible, especially to the Gospels, to look at the guidance and example of Jesus Christ. I'm very aware today that I am speaking to a group of people in which everyone else's expertise in reading the Bible probably exceeds mine. You may come to different conclusions. But for myself I don't find easy answers.

I puzzle often, for example, at the story of a group of Pharisees asking "whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Jesus asks them for a coin, and when they provide one, Jesus asks "Whose head is on this and whose title?" When told it's the emperor's, he says these famous words: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:13-17; cf. Matthew 22:15-22 and Luke 20:20-26).

This is a passage frequently used to counter any view that we should carry our religious beliefs into the public realm. On this reading, our religious beliefs should be kept distinct from our political obligations.

But you can't think about this story for very long without realizing that Jesus's answer can be read in a nearly opposite way. After all, what is Caesar's and what is God's? If we owe ultimate obedience only to God, then perhaps we should render nothing to Caesar. It is the image of Caesar's head on the coin, but everyone hearing Jesus knows that "God made man in the image of God."

In every instance in the Gospels where Jesus is asked to answer a political question, the question is posed as a trap. And in each case, Jesus finds a way to answer the question without falling into the trap. But by the same token, Jesus's answers leave me (and perhaps you) a little confused.

I find myself turning away from the political parables and towards the center of his teaching.

The prayer that Jesus teaches the disciples (Matthew 6: 10) contains these words "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

You can take this (and some have) to be a political message. You could read it as urging us to do everything we can to bring God's reign to this earth – and therefore as urging us to do everything we can to have others think and do just what we believe God asks us to do.

I asked my friend Michael Birkel, a religion professor at the college, about the unusual grammar of this passage. We don't routinely say in English things like "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

"Greek is a splendid language," he told me. "Unlike many other languages, it offers a third-person imperative, a real bonus," he continued. "In English, for example, we can command in the second-person, but not the third. So what's a good way to translate the verb in "your kingdom come"? Maybe something like "bring it on!" but, more precisely, "bring yourself on, kingdom!" For me, that casts a different light on the passage. It makes the Lord's Prayer less a gesturing at a set of instructions for what we should do, and more an expression of submission and reverence.

And this understanding of "thy kingdom come," leads me to a further (and I think crucial) question about "thy will be done." How specific is God's will? How much does God prescribe for me or for you every thought and every action. To what degree does God have a detailed plan that prescribes my every step?

Here's where I become most tentative, most uncertain. The more I try to use reason to understand the nature of God, the less certain I am that I can know the answers. Our minds are limited. For human beings, I think there is inevitably a mystery to the nature of God.

And this makes me very suspicious of the idea that we can know God has a detailed and specific plan for each and every one of us, and for each and every thing we think and do.

My own personal experience of seeking God's will is that there is a great deal that God leaves pretty much up to me. I don't just believe God leaves it up to me to decide what to have for dinner, or whether to be a Phillies fan. I believe God leaves the specifics of a great many more important matters up to me.

But if there isn't a highly specific and detailed plan, what do I make of God's will? What can it mean to pray, as Jesus asked us, "Thy will be done?"

It is down the road of this question that I am drawn to the moment when Jesus is asked "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" And Jesus replies: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like to it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

My father, an earnest, amateur theologian all the years I knew him, marveled at this passage. He was intrigued by the equality expressed in "love your neighbor as yourself," – not more than yourself, but not less. And he constantly thought about the connection Jesus makes between the two: "and the second is like to it." Loving God and loving your neighbor are closely akin – perhaps faces of the same coin.

Again, I have doubts about what I can 'know' about God's will. But I am led hesitantly by this passage (and much else in the Gospels) to think that "God's will" is not a detailed and specific prescription of doings and thinkings. It's not a paint-by-the-numbers' plan for my life.

If we believe that "thy will be done" means each of us is to do everything we can to implement a minutely specified plan of action that God has revealed to us, then we will see what we commonly see today: much certainty, much disagreement, much stridency, much conflict, much violence. Can this be "God's will?"

But I do not hear Jesus prescribing specific thoughts and specific actions. I do not hear Jesus pointing to God's will as a specific plan to be followed, implemented, carried through in minute detail. Instead I hear Jesus insisting on our best efforts in remaking our souls. I hear Jesus urging us to be responsive to love in all matters. I hear Jesus teaching us that being faithful to God's will entails steadfastly looking at every person and every predicament, every opportunity and every opponent through the lens of love.

Following "God's will" is much more a matter of approaching life in a certain way—in a way suffused with love—than a matter of discovering and following a detailed plan.

"Be responsive to love in all matters:" I believe this includes political matters as well as personal matters. It's in the nature of politics, of the public realm, that we seek for common ways of doing some things. And it's in the nature of that political realm that we will find ourselves with differing views about those common ways.

In encountering those disagreements and differences, if we are to be responsive to love in all matters, if loving God and following God's will is akin to loving our neighbors as ourselves, then I'm led to these tentative conclusions.

I'm led to think that we should believe passionately and wholeheartedly everything that we find God teaching us. And we should let our lives show that we hear God's teachings. This comes from loving your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.

And I'm also led to believe that we should be tender with one another; that we should be slow and cautious in deciding that we know the right way for everyone else; that we should be very hesitant to tell others what to think or do.

The way of love, I believe, works largely through example, not prescription.

It coaxes more than it compels or coerces.

It seeks inward obedience to God, not external obedience.

And it begins by listening carefully, and often, to God and one another.