Winter December, 2007

The Role of Religious Values in Politics

Darrin P Dixon, University of Pittsburgh - Main Campus

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/darrin_dixon/2/
The Role of Religious Values in Politics

In a pluralist society such as our own, all values—including religious values—should be allowed on the political table and up for discussion. The inclusion of religious values within political debate is not only consistent with pluralist tenets but allows for moral discussion. Critics argue that using religious values to reach political conclusions is a conversation stopper that will hinder debate and tear apart the fabric of society. I will demonstrate that even though religious values at times can be conversation stoppers, they should be allowed at the political table, because it is consistent with our pluralist tenets that all values be allowed in political debate. Moreover, I will argue that not allowing moral values, including religious values, to influence political debate is a conversation stopper because silencing one’s values prevents a full, honest political discourse and prevents dissenting opinions. This silencing causes the dissenters to fight against the democratic process, which causes a divide between the dissenters and non-dissenters.

Let me begin by providing a basic definition of pluralism, how pluralism fits within our democratic framework and the difference between private and public religious values. Descriptively, pluralism is a condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are present and tolerated within a society. Normatively, pluralism affirms that such a condition is socially beneficial and that no single explanatory system or view of reality is solely legitimate. Pluralism demands that all citizens have the opportunity to voice their opinions but does not claim to be the only legitimate political system.

I will focus on two basic forms of pluralism. In its most basic form, pluralism is a brokering between different views; each side seeks to obtain as much of the political pie as it can, and compromises may need to occur. Political discussion and compromise do not require that all values be used to enact public policy and do not entail a change in opinion. However,
both allow for all positions and values to be presented. Under this framework, it is unimportant whether or not one’s political position relies on religious values because the object of political discussion is not persuasion. In its more developed form, pluralism allows for persuasion in the midst of the brokering process, even though a change of opinion or agreement is not required.

In our constitutional democracy, we grant citizens the right to make up their minds as they desire and the right to express their reasoning freely. We protect this expression in the Bill of Rights through the freedom of religion and the freedom of expression clauses. Therefore, it is consistent with our pluralist tenets and our political culture that all citizens have the right to express their religious reasoning for taking a public stand on political issues. In a pluralist society like ours, we believe it is socially beneficial to allow and tolerate all values at the political table. In addition, the framers of the Bill of Rights explicitly affirmed these rights to expression and gave them legal standing. As a result, our political culture and legal system allow for the expression of religious values when taking a public stand on political issues.

This paper will focus on public, not private, religious values. Private religious values manifest themselves in acts done in private, in the context of one’s family, or in association with others similarly disposed. Public religious values are employed as the basis for taking a public stand on political issues. This paper argues for the inclusion of public religious values, among other values, in political debate.

Critics such as Richard Rorty argue that reasoning from religious premises to political conclusions is always imprudent, improper or both and that religious values are a political conversation stopper. Other critics, who typically endorse Liberalism, argue that allowing religious values as premises for political conclusions will hinder debate and tear apart the fabric of society. Rorty’s basic argument is that religious values are “final” in the sense that if doubt is
cast on the worth of the religious value(s), the person will resort to circular arguments, passivity or force, which will end political discussion. The concern is that if society allows religious values to influence political positions, open discussion will be frustrated because people will not concede their religious positions.

There are several problems with Rorty’s logic, in particular his broad generalities. When a political discussion occurs between religious and non-religious persons, there are typically three types of situations that can occur, as I shall go on to develop at greater lengths. First, there are times when argument and persuasion can occur between religious and non-religious persons, although this may be rare in our current society. Second, there are times when religious values are a political conversation stopper, because religious persons will not engage in argument but will base their political opinions on particular religious values or their interpretation of Biblical passages. Third, there are times, even in the first situation, when debate may come to rest on closely held beliefs that cannot be argued. In this situation, closely held beliefs may be conversation stoppers.

**Situation I:**

In the first situation, religious values are not conversation stoppers because argument and persuasion occur. Rorty’s logic stereotypes all religious persons and fails to recognize that religious values are not inherently conversation stoppers. What makes religious values conversation stoppers is when one’s religious values prevent him or her from engaging in political discussion. Religious persons rarely argue that their religion dictates a political position without further discussion; rather, religious persons will argue in favor of a position and use their religious values as one tool among many to persuade others of their position. There are often many logical reasons to enact a particular policy outside of those that are religious. It would be
unrealistic and impossible to exclude those things which hinder political exchange as a means of forcing political discussion or compromise. The times when moral discussion is often needed most is when the momentary impasse caused by moral values occurs. Rather than remaining silent on an issue, it would be better to search for common ground upon which agreement can be reached. While the gains may be small, the only way to solve the tough moral issues of our day is through open discussion, listening and intense criticism of the benefits and disadvantages of each other’s proposals, which may be faith based. Rorty’s opaque position fails to recognize that political exchange and persuasion can occur even when religious premises are the basis for political conclusions.

**Situation II:**

The second situation depicts that religious values are a conversation stopper. My basic argument is that conversation stoppers should be included in political discussion because allowing all values at the political table is consistent with our pluralist tenets and disallowing conversation stoppers may in itself be a conversation stopper. Moreover, at our core, we all have moral values about which we are unwilling to compromise. We all have moral values that are conversation stoppers. In this section, I will address two arguments in favor of the exclusion of conversation stoppers within political discussion and two arguments in favor of the inclusion of conversation stoppers within political discussion.

First, some critics of the inclusion of religious values within political debate argue that we should address political issues through commonly held values. This argument supports that using one’s religion as the basis for a political position is unacceptable and will hinder debate unless one’s values are commonly held by society. These critics believe that by focusing on what is readily agreed upon, political unity is encouraged, political progress is made in areas
underpinned by commonly held values, and the political divide and hindrance of dialogue that may result when moral and religious values are included in political debate is avoided. However, I find this perspective problematic for several reasons. First, if we disallow moral values, including religious values, because they hinder discussion, we will have to disallow many non-religious values as well. Second, there are times, arguably some of the most important times, when justifying arguments based on principles already commonly held will not work. For example, issues such as abortion, stem cell research and gay marriage will likely not be resolved by our society’s commonly held values. As Stout echoes, if we do not allow moral values to influence political debate, we will have to remain silent on some of the most problematic moral issues of our day. This silence caused by a lack of discussion on moral issues would itself be a conversation stopper. Lastly, when political debate rests on closely held beliefs, the beliefs may have areas of consensus that can be pursued, which can be the foundation for effective political discussion rather than a conversation stopper.

Second, other critics, such as Rorty, argue against the inclusion of religious values within political debate using logic that assumes that allowing religious values at the political table will be destructive (i.e., that all conversation stoppers are destructive) and not socially beneficial. This logic is not consistent with our pluralistic tenets which deem it socially beneficial to have all parties at the political table. Rorty’s logic fails to recognize that allowing dissenting opinions at the political table, even if they are allegedly conversation stoppers, is socially beneficial. A dissenting opinion today could be the mainstream political reasoning of the future. For example, when Chief Justice Rehnquist first entered the Supreme Court, he was in the minority due to his ideology and was the sole dissent on many opinions. By the time he became Chief Justice, his political ideology was nearly mainstream. We should not disregard moral positions based on the
current political or cultural leanings of society, because the voice not heard could become the
mainstream political position of the future, and the discussion of a poor political position today
could prevent the future use of that position. Our society does not want to lose the chance to
learn from and critically examine what our fellow citizens say, particularly when our fellow
citizens are expressing socially or culturally “dangerous” political positions.

Rorty’s logic fails to recognize that frustrating religious debate is not a socially
beneficial conversation stopper because it prevents dissenting opinions and causes the dissenters
to fight against the democratic process, which causes a divide between the dissenters and non-
dissenters. For example, contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas has said that Liberalism is a
secularist ideology that masks a discriminatory program for policing what religious people can
say in public. In response, Hauerwas has implied that the tenets of Liberalism are “bad ideas” for
the church. From the religious perspective, freedom of religion becomes a secular policy
designed to reduce the significance of religion, rather than to protect the right of religious
practice. By imposing a more narrow conformity of values in political debate, society would be
preventing dissenters from leading lives that reflect their beliefs, preventing the free expression
of religious ideals, imposing a way of thought that would make up peoples’ minds for them, and
ultimately, allowing the general non-religious norms of society to be imposed on the religious.

By disregarding one’s moral position, whether or not it is religious, we would be disallowing the
central democratic good of expressing the reasoning for a political position on issues one feels
passionate about. I firmly believe that this condition will only inflame those disregarded and
inflame the situation, which will cause a divide.

Third, proponents of the inclusion of religious values in political discussion argue that
allowing religious values at the political table may at times be a conversation stopper, but in a
pluralistic democracy, we have no better choice. In its most basic form, pluralism is a brokering between parties in which one’s religious values are unimportant because the object of discussion is not persuasion but to obtain as much political power as one can. Our political culture and legal system allow for the expression of religious values when taking a public stand on political issues because the inclusion of everyone in political discussion is socially beneficial. Christian organizations such as the Patriot Pastors argue they have a civil and religious responsibility to lead and be engaged in political discussion. The Patriot Pastors show their open hostility to dissenting opinions by publicly declaring they seek their own agenda, rather than attempting to influence the current political agenda. However, in a pluralist society, all groups—including hostile religious groups—are allowed to broker for political power. Critics may argue we should challenge the pluralist tenet and create a new political system that would avoid hostility and extremist views. However, while creating a new political system is possible, the benefits of pluralism I have outlined in this paper outweigh the disadvantages. Furthermore, if society is going to prevent the Patriot Pastors and similar groups from voicing their religious beliefs in political discourse, then society will have to also prevent other groups who hold beliefs not commonly shared by society from voicing their opinions in political discussion.

Lastly, proponents of the inclusion of religious values in political discussion argue that having a right does not always mean one is justified in exercising that right because there will be times when exercising that right will be improper. Under this position, one is allowed to raise a religious argument because pluralisms allows all values to be included in political discussion. However, one might restrict oneself from raising an objection because it is socially unacceptable. For instance, the First Amendment gives the right to free speech but to exercise that right by speaking racial slurs in public may be offensive and socially unacceptable. Similarly, there are
many times when it would be unacceptable for one to argue solely from religious premises when defending or arguing against a political proposal. Conversely, there will be times when we need a moral voice at the political table in order to maintain a sense of morality in our society and to maintain a focus on the individual. Society benefits by allowing moral and religious values into political debate because the inclusion of all opinions lends legitimacy to the political decision-making process. The pluralist tenets of our democracy require moral values, as well as religious values, to have a seat at the political table because it is socially beneficial.

**Situation III:**

The third situation depicts that political debate and persuasion can occur, to an extent. However, there may come a point when debate will come to rest on closely held beliefs that cannot be argued. For purposes of this paper, closely held beliefs are personal values that may become conversation stoppers once they reach the point at which they cannot be argued. This third situation is a middle ground between the first two situations, because debate and persuasion can occur but may be impeded to a certain extent.

Closely held religious and moral beliefs are just as legitimate as the closely held beliefs acquired through acculturation, reason and other means that one cannot prove. Both moral and religious beliefs are open to argument. Critics such as Barack Obama argue that at times religion is not open to argument because at some level religion does not allow for compromise. He uses the example, “If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God’s edicts, regardless of the consequences.” At some level the aforementioned statement is true. However, how one expresses one’s faith in public policy, which is distinguished from one’s personal life, is almost always up for debate. For example, the Bible says, “Love your neighbor,” but how one’s love should inform their public policy is ambiguous. Religious positions are open to argument
because one's religious values are underpinned by one’s background knowledge, acculturation and one’s interpretation of his or her religious precepts. By changing the interpretation of one’s religious precepts or one’s historical understanding, his or her values will likely change accordingly. Religious persons are no less susceptible to reason than are non-religious persons.

The reality is we all hold values that are not open to argument whether or not they are rooted in religious beliefs. Because all values can be conversation stoppers, it is unfair to isolate religious values. Both religious and non-religious persons hold “final” words. The difference is that non-religious persons use non-religious vocabularies to express their positions. For example, non-religious persons may have foundational liberal values such as autonomy, individual freedom, rational deliberation, civility and tolerance, while religious persons may have Christian values such as obedience, respect for authority and tradition, faith and community. At the same time, a non-religious person can hold Christian values and be unwilling to compromise without using a religious vocabulary. Requiring all citizens to use non-religious vocabularies could be less threatening and more unifying but would be disingenuous and would create a smoke screen engendering political skepticism and suspicion, because the real reasons for one’s political position would not be expressed. Without honesty in political discussion, society will likely remain ignorant of the real reasons for which many people are reaching ethical or political conclusions. As the above example demonstrates, we all hold engrained values on nonreligious topics, the truth of which cannot be proven. These engrained values often are not supported through reason, because they are an expression of a personal predisposition and values that are often acquired through acculturation, whether secular or faith based. If we disallow political arguments based on religious values, we would also have to disallow arguments based on acculturation and other closely held beliefs that one cannot prove. Critics may argue that there
are times values are acquired through reason rather than acculturation. However, acculturation is the bedrock of our reasoning. It determines the reasoning we will and will not accept, and it shapes our most engrained values. At their core, most value-based political positions will be conversation stoppers because one’s closely held values underpin them.

It should be expected that one’s values will enter into their reasoning on particularly morally problematic political topics such as abortion, gay-marriage, and stem cell research. It is impossible to prevent the inclusion of final words, because one can always mask his or her religious values with nonreligious words. If our society excludes those values that hinder political exchange, we will have to exclude a multitude of other values, in addition to religious values, because everyone has values about which they are unwilling to compromise. Moral values are not the exclusive providence of religion. If this state of exclusion were to occur, we would have few tools to address the most difficult moral issues of our day. Even Rorty grants that there is “hypocrisy involved in saying that believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, whereas we atheists have every right to base ours on Enlightenment philosophy.” In its basic form, discussion in a pluralist society only entails a brokering between parties, not a change in opinions. All arguments should be on the table, even conversation stoppers, because the object of discussion is not persuasion but a dialogue that will produce an amicable resolution, which cannot occur without honest political discussion.

Other critics, who typically endorse Liberalism, argue against including religious values in political debate, because they are afraid that religious values will hinder debate and may tear apart the fabric of society. By contrast, Stanley Fish argues that our society has chosen liberal values over other values because of the above fear and that it is inconclusive whether allowing religious values into political debate will tear our society apart. He points out that Liberalism
survives by maintaining a large set of non-politicized items and by removing ideals not readily agreed upon by society, often politically charged items, from discussion. However, Liberalism addresses the consequences of the inclusion of religious values in public debate without providing any evidence the potential consequences will become reality. Our society should not disregard a citizen’s political position without sufficient evidence to support that conclusion. This is not to suggest that all types of speech or political positions are allowed in political discussion or that pluralism does not have limitations. Our legal system limits expression for societal purposes. For example, one has a right to free speech, but the Supreme Court in Brandenburg v. Ohio has said the free speech protection would not protect a man in preparing “a group for violent action and steeling it to such action” (pg. 448). Our democratic framework allows all values to be at the political table, but the law limits the expression of values. However, our society typically only infringes upon the rights of others when their speech will cause, or has as its purpose, “imminent lawless action” (such as a riot) that is confirmed with evidence.

Liberalism cannot achieve its goal of fostering agreement under our democratic framework, because dissent is likely to result from disallowing moral and religious values. Allowing moral and religious values into political discussion will likely not tear apart the fabric of society because there are times when persuasion can occur between religious and non-religious persons; both moral and religious values are open to argument; religious and non-religious persons hold political positions that are underpinned by closely held values; and the inclusion of all values in political discussion is socially beneficial, lends legitimacy to the law and promotes open discussion. Overall, the liberal framework, which unreasonably censors moral values, is in direct contradiction with the basic tenets of a pluralist society (i.e., allowing all values).
Because closely held beliefs are engrained and personal by nature, it is unfair to expect everyone to communicate along the same terms. An endorsement of values commonly held could disallow personal moral and closely held, culturally engrained values in political discussion. While the reliance on values commonly held may be unifying, it does not adequately resolve important moral issues. Common language may be unifying, but it prevents honest, open political discourse. Commonly held values are continually changing and depend on the social practice one has been able to participate in and on the history of transformation they have undergone. Religious values may be different in the sense that a unique vocabulary, style of reasoning and free expression is used. Yet, both commonly held and religious values are heavily influenced by acculturation, and their truth is not readily provable. It is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect everyone to disregard their social practices and personal enculturation in favor of one commonly held set of societal values one may oppose and whose benefit is subjective. Closely held beliefs should be allowed because everyone holds beliefs that at a certain point will be a conversation stopper.

In a pluralist society, all values—including religious values—should be allowed at the political table and up for discussion. This includes religious values and closely held beliefs that are conversation stoppers, because the inclusion of values in political debate is consistent with our pluralist tenets. In order to answer the tough moral policy questions of our day, we need transparency and honesty in our political exchange to achieve true progress. The real question our society needs to answer is what role moral values and their political articulation should play in our society. I am confident we can address any negative effect moral and religious values are having on public policy, while remaining consistent with our pluralistic tenets and our democratic framework.