

FAITH AND POLITICS

An Election Year Reflection

Sharon Tomiko Santos

State Representative (D), 37th Legislative District September 12, 2004

I grew up as a p.k., a preacher's kid. One of the things I learned at an early age was to leave the preaching to the professionals. So, I'm not going to offer a sermon and I'm not going to give a lecture but I'm hoping to provoke some reflection about Faith and Politics. Specifically, I intend to provoke some reflection about our role as people of faith and as citizens of a democratic republic. While this is an especially timely topic during the election season, it is an appropriate even necessary discussion for every day of the year.

I find it puzzling, even unrealistic, that society continues to stifle thoughtful discourse about faith and politics. How many times have you heard the admonition forbidding discussion of religion and politics in polite company? In fact, a conversation about faith and politics is a conversation about the attitudes and values that inform our views about how one exists in community. For this reason alone, faith and politics of all topics demand deliberation and dialogue. And all the more since the failure to engage in dialectical debate has contributed to what one academician has described as the "God Gap," that is, the sharpening of religious rhetoric and political polemics in our democratic process.

Let me offer an example. As a candidate for re-election this year, I received a survey from the Christian Coalition of Washington. As described by the authors, this document was "designed to help educate voters on some of the views and guiding principles of candidates for public office." What followed were forty phrases covering a broad range of issue areas including Abortion and Euthanasia, Criminal Justice, Cultural Diversity, Education, Gambling and Liquor Control, Taxes and Spending, and the catch-all category Miscellaneous. Boxes labeled "Support,?" "Oppose,?" and "Undecided?" were provided under each phrase. That's it. Just a box to check in response to the issue. How, I must ask, does this inform voters about my "guiding principles?" More to the point, how does this contribute to a reasoned debate?

[As an interesting aside, I noted that of the seven items under the heading "Cultural Diversity," six dealt with Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender issues; the seventh addressed "Valid Washington ID cards for illegal aliens." But, nowhere was there room to communicate the rationale for my policy positions.]

Unfortunately, the Christian Coalition is not alone in adopting this tactic. Indeed, their methods generally reflect a more widespread tendency by individuals and organizations representing the full spectrum of political perspectives to accept matters without critical examination and to disdain a genuine exchange of opinions. Such intransigence dismays me. In my view, this attitude and behavior invites a stagnation of the spirit, both the spirit that aspires toward God and the spirit that embraces our humanity. I believe that, as people of faith and as citizens of a democratic republic, we are better served and are better servants when we focus on one simple question:

What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of you?
What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of me? Of any
and all of us? The prophet Micah tells us it is to do justice, to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God. Beautiful in its brevity; but daunting in its
difficulty! Although I have come to the opinion that these three charges are
mutually reinforcing and interdependent aspects of one transcendent commandment:
kind of like the Holy Trinity - let us consider each one separately for the
moment.

To do justice. Perhaps the most simplistic of interpretations begins with the
notion of fairness and equal treatment, similar to the meaning of "justice?" in
our Pledge of Allegiance. To do justice, then, is to uphold impartiality and
to ensure balanced opportunities. This may be well and good for the secularist
but, as a person of faith, I've always been troubled that many of Jesus's
parables ran counter to my own sense of fair play. For instance, what about the
parable of the laborers in the vineyard? Where the last ones in the field
received the same pay as those who labored from dawn. Or, in another instance,
how about that prodigal son? Where the wayward selfish fellow who squandered
his inheritance returned to be honored by his father much to the chagrin of the
dutiful son who toiled in his father's footsteps. My understanding of justice
is turned upside down with these stories!

To love kindness. Showing compassion toward others, especially those who are
less fortunate, is an expected kindness to be sure. The New Testament
particularly zeroes in on the last, the lost, and the least among us "like
orphans and widows, children and the sick, tax collectors and prostitutes"
as the people whom Jesus dared to embrace. In our world, our compassion is
often mixed with a large dose of pity think, "there, but for the grace of God,
go I" and I have a feeling that this is not really fulfilling God's expectation
of us since we are also instructed to treat our enemies in the same way. "Love
your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

To walk humbly with your God. For most of us, this poses the greatest challenge
of all. Why? Because too many of us don't really understand
the meaning of humility. Indeed, it is far easier for me to grasp the
idea by latching onto its opposite characteristics: arrogance and self-
righteousness. Like the rich man who couldn't bear to give up his wealth to
gain entry to the Kingdom of God, we are not easily parted from our egos. But,
on this point, the Bible is clear: "Whoever would be great among you must be
your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave to all. For
the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a
ransom for many."

As I have previously alluded, I've decided that I cannot fully appreciate these
directives "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God"
separately from one another. My understanding of the enigmatic elements is
edified when I consider them altogether as one commandment wherein justice and
kindness are informed by humility. This is how faith shapes my view and guides
my participation in community.

And what of my role as a citizen? My faith and my politics exist not as
separate spheres of consciousness and activity but, like our three directives,
as inter-related and mutually reinforcing aspects of the same whole. This
fundamental relationship is not well understood in America where the separation
of church and state is generally mistaken to mean the isolation of church from
state.

In truth, the affairs of the church and the affairs of the state intersect and are brought together in the day-to-day lives of individuals, individuals like you and me.

Although we may adopt many identities and serve in a variety of capacities, in reality, we are not compartmentalized beings. For example, I am the same individual in my family even though I have several identities and functions as a daughter, a sister, and a spouse?

Similarly, I am essentially the same person whether I am carrying out my duties as a member of the Legislature or as a member of my church. At the root of it all who I am no matter where I am, in public and in private lay my values, my principles, and my beliefs. Hence, my political life is inseparable from my spiritual life and should be equally indistinguishable. Indeed, as I see it, the point of politics and of faith is one and the same!

Today, we are anticipating arguably one of the most important elections in recent history. During the Democratic National Convention, I was privileged to sit in on a panel discussion entitled, "Red God/Blue God: the God Gap in Presidential Politics; Is it Real?" [This panel, by the way, was replicated at the Republican National Convention and, as I understand, was taped for future broadcasting.] In Boston, John Podesta, a former White House Chief of Staff, noted that the fate of the election rests, in large part, on the ability of the candidates to demonstrate their moral authority and articulate a moral vision that resonates with the American public; to communicate to the electorate the core values upon which their respective policies will be decided; and, finally, to convey an authentic spirit of faith. In short, what will their spiritual beliefs say about their political choices?

On both the left and the right, organizations, clergy and laity are organizing the faithful to help their candidate win. From Ralph Reed, who was hired by Karl Rove to organize the grassroots get-out-the-vote effort on behalf of President Bush, to Riverside Church's Rev. Dr. James Forbes, who is leading the "Let Justice Roll" campaign to mobilize the anti-poverty voter, churches and congregations will be involved in this year's election to an extent not seen since the 1960s. At the heart of the battle lays the attitudes and the values that inform our view about how we exist in community, as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." What will the choices I make in these upcoming elections say about my faith and about my politics? What will the choices you make say about your faith and about your politics?

In responding to a question about whether the Almighty was on the North side of slavery question, Abraham Lincoln reportedly declared, Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side. My great concern is to be on God's side.

So I will close by inviting you to join me in asking, what does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of you? To seek justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

And let all of God's people say, "Amen."