

Faith, Academia, and Politics: Legitimizing the Discussion

Notes for remarks by Preston Manning to the
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Introduction

Congratulations to the founders, supporters, occupants of the University of Calgary's Chair of Christian Thought on the occasion of your 20th anniversary.

If your role in building bridges between the faith community and academia was important twenty years ago, it is even more so today, and Sandra and I want to join with your many friends and supporters in urging you not only to carry on but also to grow.

Johnstown Flood

When I look at the list of your distinguished lecturers and also look around this room and see people who are much better versed than I on the interface between faith and academia, I am a little intimidated.

In fact, the situation reminds me of a Texan who many years ago was a survivor of the great Johnstown flood. Ever after, when he was asked to say a few words at a public gathering, he would ask if he could tell the story of how he survived the Johnstown flood. Eventually this Texan died and went to heaven where he was met by St. Peter. Peter explained that it was a heavenly custom to welcome newcomers with a reception, at which they were asked to say a few words about their lives back on earth. The Texan was delighted, but asked Peter whether it would be all right to say a few words about the Johnstown flood. To which Peter replied, "Certainly, but I must remind you that Noah will be in your audience."

Subject

I want to say a few words later on about the interface between faith and academia, and legitimizing faith perspectives in secular settings like the modern academy.

But I would like to begin by sharing a few thoughts about navigating the interface between faith and politics, and legitimizing the expression of faith perspectives in the political arena, because I believe there are some important parallels.

The Faith/Political Interface - the way things used to be in Canada:

- Faith and politics must be kept in separate watertight compartments.
- The House of Commons generally acknowledged an unwritten taboo about discussing faith.
- This was justified on the grounds of separation of church and state, but Canada has carried this much further than simply separation of religious and political institutions.

- If we ever do discuss moral and ethical issues where faith perspectives might surface, the default position is a simplistic moral relativism that says, “You believe what you believe and I’ll believe what I believe, and as long as we respect each other things will work out.”

This model, this way of handling things, is proving inadequate and breaking down.

- We can keep institutions of faith and politics separate, but we can’t keep them separate in people’s heads and hearts and lives.
 - Statistics Canada says 84% of us profess some sort of religious affiliation, the vast majority Christian.
 - Pollsters report that 60-70% of Canadians say religion plays an important role in their lives.
- There is an increasing preoccupation with ethics in our society, and the ethical dimensions of public policy, which stimulates faith-based perspectives on morality:
 - Enron, Worldcom, Adscam
 - Legislation like AHRA bill which raises profound philosophical, social, and ethical questions that can’t be avoided.
- We see violent intrusions of religious extremists in international politics (9/11).

Simplistic defaults to moral relativism are inadequate:

- Enron procedure for hiring accountants. What is 1+1? Whatever you want it to be.
- Response to 9/11: Can we really say, “Let the terrorists believe what they believe, ... and let Mr. Bush believe what he believes, ... and it will all work out”?

The challenge of navigating the Faith/Political Intersection

1. Legitimizing the Discussion: Canadians need to be told it’s “okay to talk about this.”
 - William James’ essay, “The Right to Believe”
 - “The Spirituality of Pierre Trudeau”
2. It is incumbent upon secular decision-makers to at least understand the religious mind and heart, because it is too big a factor – in our history, culture, demographics, and politics – to ignore.
3. It is incumbent upon faith-oriented people to conduct themselves in politics in such a way as to be seen as an asset, a credit...
 - Be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”
 - The mandate of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy is to develop democratic infrastructure, and to conduct educational programs such as “Navigating the Faith/Political Interface” and “Understanding the Religious Mind and Heart.”
4. We must recognize the preeminence of personal relationships.

In doing all of the above, we must also remember that those we encounter at the faith/ political interface – politicians, civil servants, voters of whatever persuasion – are first and foremost

people, all of whom have personal lives with spiritual needs for forgiveness, love, purpose in life, meaningful and healthy relationships, and comfort and compassion in the trials and crises of life.

Political man does not live by politics alone. Administrative man does not live by public policy alone. The civil servant whose newborn is born with a handicap, the political operative whose marriage is breaking up, the MP who has just been told that he has an inoperable cancer – all have needs that go far deeper than those that mere politics and bureaucracy can address, needs to which genuine faith can both speak and minister.

At the end of the day we have to remind ourselves that even politics and public service themselves are ultimately about relationships. At its most basic level, that is what the Christian faith is all about. And what the teachings and experiences of faith tell us about the nature of relationships can inform our understanding and cultivation of relationships in all other areas.

Bottom Line

To actually do all of the above – to legitimate the discussion of faith and politics, to properly inform secular decision makers re. the religious mind and heart, to effectively assist faith-oriented people to be wise and non-threatening, to truly bring the perspective of faith to bear on spiritual needs and the relational side of life – requires not only spiritual resources but also intellectual and educational resources, and reasoning and scholarship at the highest levels. That is what the Chair of Christian Thought at this university is all about.

Similar challenges are encountered in dealing with the interface between Faith and the Academy

1. We need to “legitimate the discussion,” particularly for the younger generation.
2. We need more, not less, interaction/dialogue between secular and religious scholars – breaking down rather than building up silos of isolation.
3. We need to equip students and scholars to integrate faith perspectives with other disciplines.
 - I asked fifteen of my students [at University of Toronto, seminar course on Public Policy and the Genetic Revolution] to describe on a single sheet of paper what value framework currently guides them in making ethical decisions. How do they personally decide whether an objective is good or bad or whether the means to achieve it are right or wrong?
 - The results:
 - Five said they rely almost entirely on subjective criteria centred in themselves. “I guess it comes down to *me* – what will the impact be on *me*, what will *my* parents and friends think about *me*, will this score *me* points with God?”
 - Three applied a broader humanist framework. “What will be the ramifications for *others*?” was the guideline, including application of an expanded version of the Hippocratic oath – Do no harm to others.

- Three took a more pragmatic, utilitarian approach. Count up the pluses and the minuses; calculate the costs and benefits; pursue whatever course will yield the greatest good for the greatest number or the least harm.
- Three offered creative mixtures which defied categorization and included elements of all of the above.
- Only one was explicitly Christian, relying for guidance on the character of a moral being beyond themselves and humankind, and a moral code based on that character.
- In other words, we as a class were all over the map, just as we Canadians are as a people. If we had been constituted as a group of policy makers or scientific researchers required to make an ethical decision I don't know how or what we would have decided. There was one Christian beacon in our midst, but it was only one among many and was frail and flickering rather than strong and clear.

4. We need to recognize the preeminence of personal relationships, that the people we meet at the interface of faith and academics are also first and foremost people who have personal lives with spiritual needs that more thinking, writing, and intellectual discourse cannot satisfy.

Academic man does not live by intellect alone. And when we must go to a loved one or a friend who is dying of cancer in the hospital we could speak to their intellect by quoting from Einstein's Theory of Relativity or Darwin's *Origin of Species*, but we would most likely be addressing more fundamental needs if we quoted from the poet's psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd.... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I need fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Again the Bottom Line

To actually do all of the above, to legitimate the discussion of faith in secular academia, to conduct meaningful dialogue with secular scholars, to equip faith-oriented students to integrate their faith with other areas of learning, to truly bring the perspective of faith to bear on the personal spiritual needs of friends and colleagues and the relational side of academic life, requires not only spiritual resources but also intellectual and educational resources, and reasoning and scholarship at the highest levels, which is what the Chair of Christian thought at this university is all about.

What about the tension between faith and the secular academy, between faith and science?

1. These tensions are not new, but I appreciate that they are real and growing.
 - Emerging contest between "intelligent design" and evolution. (Used to believe in the theory of intelligent design until I went to Ottawa.)
 - Articles like that in *Calgary Herald* of September 27, 2005, "Study claims religion contributes to society's ills."
 - Books like Sam Harris's *End of Faith* in which he argues that any belief that cannot be scientifically demonstrated is not only false but also dangerous.

2. There is one area where I believe that people of faith, secular academics generally, and people of science ought to make common cause and that has to do with defending and expanding freedom of belief, academic freedom, and freedom of scientific inquiry.

3. As you know, there are those who not only criticize the legitimacy of faith, but go beyond that to argue in favour of suppression of those beliefs and expressions of belief that do not conform to their definition of scientific rationality.

Sam Harris states in *The End of Faith*:

- “One of the central themes of this book ... is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.” [pg. 14-15]
- “Our ‘freedom of belief,’ if it exists at all, is minimal. Is a person really free to believe a proposition for which he has no evidence? No. ... We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them ‘religious’; otherwise, they are likely to be called ‘mad,’ ‘psychotic,’ or ‘delusional.’ ... It takes a certain kind of person to believe what no one else believes. ... while religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are.” [pg. 71-72]

4. I suggest that freedom of religious expression, freedom of scientific inquiry, and academic freedom all rest on the same pillar – freedom of conscience and expression itself; that freedom of conscience has its roots in religious conceptions of free will which were the antecedents of academic freedom and freedom of scientific inquiry; that this freedom needs to be explained and defended and expanded, not constricted, in our time; and that such explanations and defences need to be carried out in and by the academy with intellectual rigour and scholarship of the highest order.

Conclusion

If there was a need for the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary and in this city twenty years ago, then there is an even greater need to support and strengthen this Chair today—to provide a place and the financial support required for scholars like Prof. Craigie, Prof. Gordon Harland, Prof. Allan Sell, and Dr. Douglas Shantz who occupies the Chair today.

I would therefore urge those who are in a position to do so to make every effort to ensure that this Chair of Christian Thought is supported and strengthened in every way possible.