
Honoring America's Generosity of Spirit: Religion in Minnesota's Public Square

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Mitch Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment, spoke at a luncheon program sponsored by Church Metro, a Twin Cities nonprofit organization that addresses the ethical and spiritual concerns of business leaders, in October 1998. The following is taken from his remarks.

I was broadsided at the intersection of religion and public policy in Minnesota within days of my moving here from upstate New York in the summer of 1974.

I arrived in Minneapolis in mid-August of that year, two weeks ahead of Peter Magrath's arrival as the new president of the University of Minnesota. I had spent the previous two years working as Peter's director of public information at the State University of New York at Binghamton, and in one of the great strokes of exceptional fortune in my life, he invited me to join his staff out here as his speechwriter. I was all of twenty-six at the time, and I increasingly appreciate how he wasn't that much older at forty-one.

If I recall correctly, on the Friday before Peter was to assume his new

assignment officially, one of the Minneapolis newspapers (the Star and Tribune had not merged yet) ran a big story about how he actually might have been the Board of Regents' second choice, but was chosen over David Saxon of UCLA because one or more of the regents had problems—or so went the allegation—with Saxon's faith. He was Jewish.

As one might imagine, such a charge subtracted from my joy of the moment, not that it did much for Peter's weekend, either. Yet while I hardly knew the dozen regents at the time, I chose to accept their denials, as I simply couldn't believe that trustees of a great citadel of learning could be so blazingly stupid, never mind bigoted.

Framing matters more positively, I had far too much faith in the decency

of the United States and of major American institutions—especially the premier university of my newly adopted state—to assume anything unsavory. I also put great stock in the emphatic rebuttals of the chairman of the Board of Regents, former governor Elmer L. Andersen, a wonderful man. Though in recalling this episode, I can only imagine the rosters of people who must have attributed my credulousness to nothing fancier than naïveté.

At any rate, being a good team player, I went out of my way—as the new president's obviously Jewish aide—to be seen chatting and hanging out at meetings and luncheons with the regent who was at the epicenter of the controversy: L. J. Lee, an elderly and not terrifically sophisticated chap from Bagley, in northwestern Minnesota.

L. J. clearly was pained by the accusations and he wanted me to know not only that they were bunk, but also that his family tree had a proud Jewish limb or two—a revelation I was to hear on a regular basis from any number of folks over the next several years. Just about everyone on the prairie, it seemed, had a Chosen forebear somewhere. Again, while I trust that some would have heard such stories as mainly patronizing, I preferred to interpret them as acts of communion—or, less grandly, well-meaning conversation fillers. At the very least, for a guy who had grown up in Queens, I was impressed that so many of my people had kin in Greater Minnesota, then known as “Outstate” Minnesota.

I don't want to dwell too long on this opening story, thick with themes

and lessons though it may be, but several months after the controversy broke, the legislature held hearings on the presidential selection process. I attended what I think was the first session, in which Elmer Andersen gave a zesty speech about how the Board of Regents was innocent of discrimination and how the University of Minnesota, under its new leadership, stood poised to do extraordinary things—and that, son of a gun, a member of that new team was in the room that very evening. Elmer then proceeded to introduce me, paying extra attention (or so I recall, probably unfairly) to every available vowel in my last name.

After the meeting ended, Linda Picone, a reporter for one of the Minneapolis papers, came over and asked: “What are you?” To which I responded, forthrightly: “I'm Jewish.” To which she said in return: “I know that. What do you do?”

What I still do, I would like to think, is start from the rock-certain conviction that the world has never known a nation more hospitable to religious variety than the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Likewise, I start from the premise that the overwhelming majority of Americans are of bone-deep goodwill when it comes to living and working, playing and contesting, with fellow citizens and others whose spiritual devotions depart, often markedly, from their own. In such matters, our national goblet is more than half full—and the metal of which it is sculpted is precious.

These are my biases, if you will, when it comes to the connection

between religious realms and public squares. An additional animation might be disbelief that founders of the original American Experiment ever imagined a wall demarcating church from state as tall and as thick as the one that has been built in recent decades—or at least claimed by some to exist. I make this last point, I must add, while simultaneously recognizing just how intricate this subject can be, and just how marginal and vulnerable religious (and other) minorities can and do feel sometimes, regardless of the solidity and security of their objective circumstances.

All of the above should be considered prologue for the main grist of my discussion, which I've construed as having to do with questions such as the following.

Much is said and written about how religion should not be entwined in politics. But what about the ways in which religion and public affairs are inevitably braided together, and the ways in which religion ought to be taken into account in public life?

And much is correctly said and written about the responsibility of America's religious majority to be tolerant of religious minorities. But what about the obverse: the responsibility of religious minorities to be tolerant of our nation's Christian majority?

Religion and Public Policy

Let's start with the connection between religion and public policy as it plays itself out in two areas in particular. First is political activities, including not just those led by the likes of the

Christian Coalition, but also those associated mostly with the left, including the civil rights movement and various "peace" movements of recent decades. And second, I want to touch briefly on social policy, especially efforts aimed at turning troubled lives around.

Religious politics, right and left

It goes without saying that religion is implicit in almost all of politics and public life in the sense that the men and women who are engaged in such pursuits, elected or not, almost always seek to serve their constituents and neighbors well and with honor; they seek to do right by their fellows.

It also should go without saying that the moral gyroscopes spinning away in the hearts and minds of most Americans are grounded in what they believe to be spiritual truths: lessons they have absorbed, intentionally or not, from the very first day their parents dropped them off at kids' chapel. In this real, if not always self-conscious, way, religion saturates public life in America. Pity us if this were not true.

So the key question—my apologies for the obviousness of all this—is not whether religion is implicated in politics, but how it's implicated. I assure you that there are definite ways that would offend me just as much as they would drive a gaggle of ACLU lawyers wild. Though having allowed that, I also need to add that I'm currently angered by few such practices. Sure, someone every once in a while declares the United States to be a "Christian nation" in ways that do not warm the innards of non-Christians. And sure,

some folks get carried away and don't sufficiently appreciate how the certainty of what they see as revealed truth must somehow be reconciled with the rounded edges of compromise if this very big democracy is to work. But in the main, my complaints about religious excess are few.

This, though, is not the usual take of critics of many conservative organizations. To such skeptics, the United States is under assault by right-wing zealots who, if they really knew anything about the First Amendment, would keep to their (preferably untelevised) pulpits and leave politics to those who are entitled to engage in the fray—meaning those whose motivations and preferred benchmarks are more aligned with those of the Democratic Party.

No one on the left, for example, was terribly worried when religious leaders spoke out forcefully (and rightly) on behalf of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s. Few if any liberals, for that matter, were concerned that the civil rights movement was headquartered in black churches and was led by a preacher, Martin Luther King Jr.

In more recent years, I don't recall too many progressives suffering constitutional angst when various clergy sought to beat the stuffing out of Reagan administration policies from Moscow to Managua—and Bush administration policy in the Persian Gulf.

More recently still, and beyond the fact that I disagreed with them on the policy merits, I had no problem with Catholic bishops when they opposed Republican ideas for welfare reform.

But can you imagine the reaction in liberal circles if an organization of conservative clergy took to their pulpits to oppose a Democratic welfare scheme?

And why am I not surprised that Norman Lear and the left-leaning People for the American Way have not protested the fact that twenty-two member churches of the National Council of Churches are pushing for Senate approval of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming?

In the matter of the so-called religious right, there is no question, as I've already said, that some members have been known to do offensive things. But we need to better acknowledge that Americans, especially those on the left, tend to worry about religious contamination of public squares largely to the extent that it's their political opponents, and not their buddies, who are preaching and winning.

Redeeming lives

I want to change gears and talk about social policy issues: helping at-risk children learn, helping fathers honor their family commitments, helping mothers leave welfare, helping alcoholics and drug addicts stay clean, and the like. My starting point here is straightforward: faith-based programs are generally more successful in helping people get their lives in some semblance of order than are secular programs. I make no claim about this being true for all people in need; I do believe it's true for most.

Framing things another way, I've long believed that we need to take greater advantage of our religious insti-

tutions and traditions in tackling our toughest—which is to say, most human—problems while doing so in ways that fully honor both our national Constitution and our national variety. Again I recognize any number of potential trapdoors here, but I’ve never understood the wisdom of tying what might be our strongest arm, and our kindest hand, needlessly behind our back.

As I was getting ready one evening to write the preceding paragraphs, I received a phone call from one of my wife’s former colleagues. She wanted to know who was speaking on a rebroadcast of an old American Experiment forum she was then watching on Channel 32 in Minneapolis. The speaker, she said, was “awesome,” or some youngish word to that effect.

I tooled down from Channel 54 and the Twins game and told her it was Sister Connie Driscoll, who runs a very successful program for homeless women and children in Chicago: St. Martin de Porres House of Hope. Sister Connie would be the perfect archetype of a tough-loving nun even if she didn’t wear a black eye patch and didn’t travel with a bodyguard.

There’s no need or space here to detail how Sister Connie and her associates go about their work. I would only ask that you imagine the kind of demands she puts on her clients about staying out of trouble and assuming personal responsibility—as well as the spiritually fueled love she invests in every one of her clients as she makes those demands. And then I would ask that you imagine the parallel dynamics at work between the average govern-

mental bureaucracy and men and women who either have hit bottom or are crashing on rocks and boulders nearby.

I make this point with all due respect to civil servants, as I appreciate the assorted obstacles they must leap every day. But the difference in the two approaches can be akin to seeking help from someone who reaches out to take your hand and say that God loves you, as opposed to someone who trembles at the thought of approaching any part of you, or mentioning anything proscribed by a big, thick manual, for fear of being grieved against or sued.

Close to home, my wife, Diane McGowan, recently resigned after serving for about ten years as executive director of Our Saviour’s Housing, a program in the Phillips neighborhood of south Minneapolis for homeless and formerly homeless people. I take it for granted that she was better able to serve her clients—or her “guests,” as she preferred to call them—under the aegis of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church than under the authority of, say, Hennepin County government.

Even closer to home, I take it for granted that Diane’s guests were better served by the fact that what she did every day and many nights was really her ministry, her calling. I might add here that all truly would be right with the world if we could just get “ministries” and “callings” to pay as well as “jobs.”

Some of you may know that I’m a strong supporter of educational freedom, and that I’m privileged to chair Minnesota’s two major school-choice organizations: Minnesotans for School

Choice and the Partnership for Choice in Education. As you might imagine, I'm well-practiced in making any number of arguments on behalf of choice, including how expanded options for parents would increase competition between and among schools, be they public or private, thereby strengthening education for all children. This is, in fact, probably the most frequently cited rationale for choice.

My favorite arguments, however, have less to do with market virtues and more to do with moral virtues.

"It is a public policy sin," I told a mainly middle-class audience in Milwaukee about seven years ago, "to force children to go to schools that not one single person in this room would willingly send their own children to."

More recently, I asked the principal of a Catholic elementary school, a nun, what the mission of her school was. She said something about how it was to "manifest God's love in every child." I remember thinking, Now that's a mission with meat on its bones, readily and concretely understood by all concerned. I would go so far as to say that it's hard to imagine a boy or girl not profiting academically, socially, morally, and in every other way by such coherence.

I said that we need to take greater advantage of our religious institutions and traditions in tackling our toughest problems. I know of no method of doing this that is more tangibly promising than affording all children—but especially low-income kids—a realistic opportunity for an education rooted in faith, if in fact that is their parents' wish. And yes, there is no doubt in my

mind that such a course is perfectly feasible constitutionally.

An apt way of summing up is to cite two good friends, both economists, who have written wonderfully not just about what matters materially, but also about what matters spiritually.

"The mention of God may seem quaint," Glenn Loury of Boston University has written, "but it is clear that the behavioral problems of the ghetto (and not only there) involve spiritual issues. A man's spiritual commitments influence his understanding of his parental responsibilities. No economist can devise an incentive scheme for eliciting parental involvement in a child's development that is as effective as the motivations of conscience deriving from the parents' understanding that they are God's stewards in the lives of their children."

John Brandl, a former DFL state legislator from Minneapolis and now, I'm pleased to note, dean of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, has added this: "The urban crisis is a disease of the soul for which a more powerful balm than money will be required."

If theologian Michael Novak can write brilliantly about economics, I see no reason why economists Loury and Brandl can't write similarly about religion.

Tolerance

I want to talk now about tolerance, but smite me if I use the word multicultural or if I beseech us to "celebrate our diversity."

More exactly, I want to talk briefly

about three things: first, religious expression in the workplace; second, the responsibility of religious minorities to be accommodating of our nation's Christian majority; and third, just in case you may have been too pleased with what I've been saying, my discomfort with the way in which some religious leaders and activists come across as less than warmhearted in discussing homosexuality.

Happy holidays

In the same way that religious commitments should be seen as legitimately shaping one's political and other public activities, I would hope that a person's faith should be seen as rightfully having a lot to do with shaping his or her professional or occupational life. By one measure, I don't mean anything more complicated here than men and women dealing with colleagues and employees in ways that stand up to the tests of a good sermon. But there are other manifestations of religious expression that carry potential for giving offense. For an easy example, think of holidays and celebration of them.

I can think of any number of ways for a business to mark the Christmas season so as to bring joy and good tidings to just about everyone. For instance, I never fail to be moved whenever a menorah is juxtaposed with a Christmas tree or a crèche. Then again, it's not hard to think of ways of celebrating the birth of Jesus that make non-Christians feel like interlopers and near aliens in their own offices and communities.

I once attended a Christmas party

that transmogrified almost into a church service: the guests rose and sat during their caroling with what I took to be ecclesiastical precision. Sensing that I and several other Jews in the room were uncomfortable with this fervent turn of events, one of our hosts suggested that we lead the group in a Hanukkah song or two. I demurred, suggesting instead that everyone continue caroling—but by singing the words from right to left. Suffice it to say I was never invited back to that particular affair. It wasn't an "office" party as such, but it was still a work-related event.

Some sensitivity mavens, as you know, contend or dictate—or both—that co-workers should never wish each other "Merry Christmas" in the vicinity of the water cooler; that they should only admonish their colleagues to have politically correct, spiritually bereft "Happy Holidays." Strictures like these, of course, are beyond absurd, and if I were to drive home just one point here, it would be that I am confident of the ability of the overwhelming majority of Americans to strike right and respectful balances, not just when it comes to celebrating holidays like Christmas, but also regarding broader, everyday questions of religious expression on the job.

Minority obligations

Fair is fair, though, and Christians are not the only folks obliged to seek balance as they go about their business in the public square. Religious minorities have obligations of their own.

I certainly understand the need for minorities—be they religious or other-

wise—to stand firm in safeguarding their rights; to be alert always and to be sticklers when it’s necessary. But I personally have never understood either the inherent or the political wisdom of embracing views about church-state separation that are cosmically more absolutist than anything ever conceived by the Founders and that, over and above, needlessly offend and anger many other citizens.

What kind of suspect activities am I talking about? A prime example is the outlawing of invocations—simple, ecumenical prayers—at public school graduations. I’m sorry, but I don’t even begin to grasp the profit of such a prohibition.

Several years ago, I asked columnist Mona Charen, who is Jewish herself (and a more observant Jew than I am, quite frankly), to lead an American Experiment program on the obligation of religious minorities toward the majority. Here are a few lines of what she said that morning:

Minorities owe themselves and the majority a sense of proportion. It is certainly reasonable to ask the majority to be respectful of minority viewpoints. It’s unreasonable to demand that the majority stop being what they are. . . . It’s fair to say “make room”; it’s not fair to say “make yourselves over.”

Likewise, she concluded:

Just because Christians are the majority doesn’t mean they’ve lost all claim to courtesy and consideration. We have become a nation of killjoys, ready to pounce on careless Christians who slip Christianity into the public

domain. We would do well to consider that the country the majority created is a pretty good one, a pretty just one, and a pretty open one. Perhaps a degree of gratitude is in order.

Not too many people like to confront publicly the fact that, no matter how accommodating to minority viewpoints our country is (and there is hardly a more accommodating nation on the globe), there are inescapable prices to be paid for being a minority. Thinking about the Christmas season again, and at the risk of sounding melodramatic, I would argue that there is barely a single non-Christian in the United States who escapes all feelings of marginality at that time of year. But that’s just the way it is.

Homosexuality

It has come to be impossible to talk about religion and tolerance in the same breath without also saying something about homosexuality—or, more pertinently, about the increasingly rough friction between those who favor what is described as the “gay rights agenda” and those who oppose it on religious and moral grounds. Let me offer but a few sentences of an argument.

I fully recognize that once a sizable number of very determined people, both homosexual and not, began advocating on behalf of gay marriage, gay adoption, and other highly charged issues—once, in other words, disagreements about sexually related behavior became matters of high-stakes politics—the fallout would not always be pretty. This was made even more cer-

tain once some gay activists opted for a politics of infuriation by doing outrageous things such as interrupting mass at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral.

I also recognize that as someone who is personally opposed to, for example, gay marriage, but who is nonetheless reluctant and squeamish about marshaling the charge against it, I'm indebted to those individuals and groups who do lead the opposition—not that I'm always comfortable with their manner and tone in doing so. It's precisely that discomfort that is at the heart of my final point.

Diane and I were watching some kind of media event on C-SPAN in which religious conservatives were making the case for what they saw as the ability of gays and lesbians, with God's help, to turn straight. One of the speakers was an Orthodox rabbi from New York who, I don't doubt, worked his way through seminary as a New York City cabdriver, likely studying under Danny DeVito of Taxi. After he finished his remarks, I turned to Diane and noted that he hadn't sounded very pastoral to me. She agreed with my understatement.

The other speakers, at least the ones I heard, were all Christian, and they all did a much better job than the rabbi of suggesting love for sinners while simultaneously making clear their hatred for what they saw as sins.

Yet even so, and while grasping as well as I can the moral revulsion with which many religious conservatives view homosexuality, and while agreeing that some claims in the name of

gay rights do, in fact, contain dangers for society, I nonetheless wish that some of my friends on the right would come across as a little less preoccupied, a little less fevered. Our aim as a people, as I've tried to argue here, should be to seek proportion and balance—to honor our country's genetically encoded generosity of spirit—on those occasions when secular and religious realms compete for what can be tight spaces in public squares.

Conclusion

A good way to conclude is to cite a book I recently read, luckily after I wrote the first draft of these remarks. I say luckily, because I would have been far too tempted to save a lot of time by simply paraphrasing and quoting from it at profligate length. It's that good.

The book is *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America*, by Elliott Abrams, whom you may remember from his long tenure as assistant secretary of state during the Reagan administration.

As the book gears up for its own conclusion, Abrams cites a familiar portion of Washington's Farewell Address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity," our first president said, "religion and morality are the indispensable supports." Washington was quick to qualify this assertion, though, by adding: "Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion." This is the case, he said, because "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national

morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

In response to this late-eighteenth-century excerpt, Abrams makes two main points. First, that “Washington and his contemporaries believed that religion was beneficial for the society regardless of the ultimate truth of the religion in question—or of any religion.” And second, that “American institutions were created to allow religion to fill that role yet not extend so far that it could limit the freedom of conscience of any citizen.” (The emphasis is mine.)

Mr. President and Mr. Secretary:
I’ve tried here, but I couldn’t say it any better than you already have. n