

Politics as an Approximation of the Kingdom of God and Politics as Baal

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As a Christian pastor I am as dismayed and grieved as anyone about the political divisions of our present day in America which are rending churches, families, relationships and communities. In face of this concern I offer a distinction between politics as an *approximation* of the kingdom of God and “Politics as Baal”, to use the phrase of Will Campbell and James Holloway in their 1970 book, *Up to Our Steeples in Politics*.

Politics and moral values belong together. Jesus and the Hebrew prophets warned of the separation of religious practice and the political realm. Righteousness includes both personal morality and social morality, that is, where we seek the well-being of all people in a community and nation. Moreover, Hebrew and Christian scriptures urge special concern for the poor and most vulnerable in our midst, those whom Jesus called “the least of these.”

History has shown the destructive consequences when the realm of the sacred is divorced from the realm of politics. Into such a vacuum rushes

totalitarianism. History has also shown the dangers when religion has sought to align itself with political power, preferring to rule rather than to serve. The founders of our nation were concerned to avoid theocracy in America, hence the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Religion serves best when it sees politics as an *approximation* of the values of the kingdom of God. When any religious or political group sees itself as *the* expression of the kingdom of God it turns idolatrous: “Politics as Baal.”

In ancient Hebrew thought, the *baalim*, or *baals*, were the false gods that people worshipped, the “gods that are not gods”, to quote Paul. When our politics takes on divine pretention it becomes idolatrous. Theologian Paul Tillich who watched the rise of Hitler first hand defined the “demonic” as when anything “*finite*” claims to be, or is taken to be, “*infinite*.”

When, therefore, the political realm itself is taken to be the final or ultimate realm, politics becomes baal. Such is the danger of all totalitarian regimes and all political religions. Protestant Reformer John Calvin said that the human mind is a “perpetual idol factory”; politics can be an awfully seductive substitute for God.

When we identify the kingdom of God with one political party or ideology, baalism is close at hand. When one's political affiliation is more determinative in one's life than deepest religious identity, we are with Aaron and the Hebrew people dancing around a golden calf.

On the other hand, when we see politics as an approximation of the kingdom of God and of our deepest moral values, there is room for respectful dialogue across the political aisles, we see ourselves as seekers alongside others toward the truth and the building of the "good society." Compromise becomes a moral good not evil. We acknowledge with Paul that we "know in part." We do not equate our brand of politics with the mind of God. We learn the art of humility, which is the sober recognition of the limits of human power, knowledge and goodness.

Let us not stop short of the moral demands of justice. "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue" says the Hebrew scripture, repeating the word for emphasis. "Let justice roll down like waters", roared the prophet Amos. Jesus confronted the religious leaders of his day, and in the name of their shared scriptures challenged them to go beyond the small pieties and practices of their religion to the "weightier matter of the law: justice, mercy and faith," which echoed the words of Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God."

Decades ago Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that justice without love becomes something less than justice, to which I would add, love without justice becomes something less than love. Which speaks both to how we define justice and how we pursue it.

In his important book, the *Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Jonathan Haidt concludes that we humans are deeply moral creatures, but that morality can blind us to the moral values of others. He warns us about “the partisan mind” which can become as addicted to our partisan thoughts and feelings as a mind physically addicted to cocaine.

So let us take time to de-tox and learn again what it means to seek together what is good and true and just. Our religious houses would be an excellent place to start.

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