

ESSAY

Moral Judgments and the Ends of Religious Politics

Jeff Wheeldon

Politics and religion are often eschewed as the two worst topics of dinnertime conversation, perhaps on the assumption that it can be very difficult to talk about one without the other. At the same time, any member of a liberal democracy, but especially a citizen of North America, is also well versed in the separation of church and state, and very likely believes strongly that the two social institutions must be kept separate, even if sharp disagreement about what that looks like in practice remains. Arguments about that separation almost inevitably degenerate into caricatures of either religion or politics, revealing the reality that they cannot be disentangled without undermining or even destroying one or both. To keep both of these critical institutions healthy, they must be kept in healthy relationship. Regrettably, they are not healthy today, and social psychology can bring perspective to the deterioration we are witnessing.

How Politics and Religion Relate

Political and religious institutions are rooted in values, and structure our lives. Ideally, a religious institution takes its cues from theology (a set of propositions about the nature of reality) and translates that theology into a worldview which finds expression in religious practices, culture, and ethics. When those ethics enter the public sphere, they become political: expressions of values that can collide with the values of others in society. In democracies, political institutions employ competitive (electoral) and adversarial (parliamentary/congressional or judicial) processes to translate those contested values into policies that govern our lives. As such, what we both personally and collectively believe about reality, whether our theology is theist or not and whether our political institutions are religious or not, is the basis for how we live both individually and socially. There is a flow from values through actions:

theology → religion → ethics → politics → policy
 (beliefs) → (values) → (actions) → (values) → (actions)

Theology is far from the only input into beliefs, and religion is not the only place where values are formed, but for a religious person, these are the primary and most deliberate ways that we form and express our values. A non-religious person, in contrast, might use a particular philosophy in the same way and for the same purposes. Likewise, ethics and policy are far from the only expressions or actions that flow from our values, but they are the expressions that most practically and deliberately govern our lives. And finally, it is important to note that politics, as a conversation about values, has significant feedback into ethics and values, and that this can be quite constructive and even necessary as a response to criticism. Nonetheless, a linear flow from belief through ethics to policy, governed by religious and political institutions along the way, constitutes the most healthy relationship between religion and politics. Unfortunately, that's not at all what we see in our political and religious institutions in North America today.

Moral Foundations Theory

The muddled state of our institutions can be clarified with some help from Moral Foundations Theory, popularized by Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). Using both qualitative and quantitative research, Haidt and his colleagues have identified five or six core values they call "moral foundations" which they express in dualities: care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, in-group loyalty versus betrayal, respect for authority versus subversion of authority, sanctity or purity versus degradation, and (as a later addition) liberty versus oppression. Haidt acknowledges that there may be more, and notes that there are many nuances and combinations possible for each, but these are foundational and rooted in evolution – one chapter is devoted to exploring the evolutionary advantages of each moral foundation. Moral foundations are expressed in pre-rational moral judgments, or how we know instantly if something is right or wrong even before we have processed it cognitively. When we finally do process it cognitively, we tend merely to justify our moral judgment, even if we have to rationalize it to the point of nonsense.

Haidt describes how people from different ends of the political spectrum value the moral foundations differently. Self-described liberals place a heavy emphasis on care/harm and fairness/cheating, and have a much lower regard for the other foundations of loyalty, authority, and purity. Self-described conservatives value all of the foundations more or less equally, but with an even higher regard for purity. It is worth noting that these different emphases are clear in liberal and conservative religious traditions as well as politics: biblical scholars have long noted the difference between the priestly and prophetic traditions in Scripture, with priestly passages being identifiable by their concern for purity (ritual cleansing) and loyalty (cultural and religious purity, supporting God's chosen king), while prophetic passages tend to focus more on subversion of corrupt authority, calling out injustice or cheating, and caring for the oppressed

and poor. While the Bible keeps these different emphases in conversation and tension, today's politics divides them as sharply as possible.

The Conservative Advantage

Because moral foundations trigger pre-rational moral judgments, they are ripe for political manipulation. Being pre-rational, they are visceral responses that are not particularly vulnerable to facts. Furthermore, being moral judgments, they are wired directly to our deepest values and elicit very strong responses. Efforts to manipulate our moral foundations are so commonplace that the terminology associated with them is widely known. For example, a politician will “play to their base” (make statements or propose policies that trigger approval from supporters) or “dog whistle” (a statement or policy that triggers one side deeply, while the other is deaf to it). Some issues will trigger both liberals and conservatives at the same time, but in different ways. For example, NFL players who kneel in protest during the national anthem receive the praise of liberals who have thereby been triggered by the care, fairness, oppression, and subversion (in a positive way) foundations. Simultaneously, because of the very same act, players receive the outrage of conservatives who have been triggered by the betrayal, subversion (in a negative way), and even degradation (of the flag) foundations.

The complexity of our moral judgments can be powerful, and resistant to our efforts to understand and communicate our own values, much less those of others. But that complexity does not dilute the fact that, simply put, conservatives have more buttons to push. While self-described liberals rated care/harm and fairness/cheating at around a value of five on a scale of six, they rated the other moral foundations around three, often making them tone-deaf to “dog whistles” designed to trigger those judgments. If politics is about gaining the support of the population, and if that can be done by triggering pre-rational moral judgments as a way of appealing to people's values, then conservative politicians have a distinct advantage in that they have a broader vocabulary of values language with which to elicit a response. Liberal political communication features a lighter application of values language, and places more emphasis on technocratic arguments full of facts and figures in support of their policies. Meanwhile, conservative political communication features a heavy emphasis on values language, and rarely bothers anymore to offer a serious policy platform.

The End of Policy

While the practice of politics focuses on gaining the support of the population, the actual purpose of politics is to translate values into policy. A major flaw in our democracy is that it depends on the validation of a party, and not necessarily their policies; so long as a party can appeal to the values and concerns of the population, policy is not necessary in order to win an election. Recent elections in America (2016) and Ontario (2018) are excellent examples of this. Populist leaders ran campaigns heavy on values expression and very light on policy, a practice

that continued even after they were elected. Legislation that has been passed by both of these governments has been primarily aimed at reversing the policies of their predecessors, with very little that might be considered a new contribution to policy. And campaign rallies and messaging have continued long after the respective elections ended. Rather than a political conversation about values progressing through a campaign and resulting in policy, the flow gets cut off at the campaign, feeding back instead into the values conversation. We end up with politics that is always campaigning, always engaging values or triggering moral judgments, with governance becoming almost an afterthought.

The threat this poses to western liberal democracy should not be understated. In terms of government accountability, the current state of the Trump administration serves as a profound example of the power of appealing to moral foundations. President Trump is at the center of numerous scandals and investigations that, for anyone else, could have been sufficient grounds for impeachment individually, let alone collectively. Several of his staff and lawyers have been indicted, and have implicated him in illegal activities, yet his base and his party both remain unfazed. A recent article by Peter Beinart (2018) examines why Trump supporters, who were explicitly drawn to Trump because they were outraged at corruption, are unfazed by evidence of corruption in his administration. Without reference to moral foundations theory, Beinart captures one of the differences between liberals and conservatives that Haidt describes: Trump's supporters are less concerned about corruption in relation to the law (which they view as a tool of the "establishment" to which they are opposed) than they are about perceived corruption of the hierarchies and traditional values with which they identify. In terms of moral foundations, Trump supporters appear to view corruption through the lens of subversion and degradation, rather than as an example of cheating. So long as Trump can appeal to people in ways that transcend the actual law of the land, he may thereby be immune to impeachment.

More importantly, this is deadly to the very concept of liberal democracy itself. The idea that we are capable of collectively determining our own fate is core to our political institutions, and assumes that we are individually capable of free thought, rational debate, and persuasion. It assumes that we are collectively capable of achieving a balance and accountability brought about through the processes of politics and the law. But if we are so prone to pre-rational moral judgments that we can be manipulated so easily and successfully by trolls and bots, and if this is such a successful approach to politics that leaders can be elected without a robust policy platform, can we really expect our institutions to function on such a basis? If politics does not lead to policy, what is its purpose beyond defining the boundaries of tribalism? The politics of triggering moral judgments is the politics of division and the endless campaign. It is the politics of alt-right populism, prone to corruption, and flirting with dictatorship.

The New Religion

Moreover, the impact of short-circuiting the flow from theology through religion to ethics embodied in politics which produces actual policy is also disastrous for religion. Politics that appeals on a pre-rational level to deeply held values is able to trigger those values without, or even against, the influence of facts, theology, or philosophy.

Theologians and philosophers deal with facts and ideas, but also with where facts and ideas lead us, that is, to values and ethics. These fields recognize that transformation from an idea to a value to ethics is far from automatic. Theologians and philosophers have always advocated for particular lifestyles and disciplines and community structures designed to instill values and promote virtues. To transform a belief into a deeply-held value, much less an ethic, often takes a collective effort over generations.

Merely eliciting a pre-rational moral judgment, in contrast, is instantaneous. Our era is increasingly being defined as “post-truth” because, in our intensely politicized society, and particularly online, truth is not only difficult to discern but largely irrelevant to social or political engagement. The perception of truth has more to do with in-group loyalty than facts, with each side of the political spectrum more prone to some conspiracy theories than to others. Once a moral judgment has been made, confirmation bias and motivated reasoning effectively seal that judgment, protecting it from intellectual challenges, especially from the other side.

The Christian appeal to Truth (often carefully spelled with a capital T) becomes distorted in such a climate. Because the Bible is so centrally and profoundly ethical in nature, we have often treated morality or ethics as a fact rather than a contextualized judgment, reducing moral judgments to hardline propositions that are rarely possible to meet, and that often reflect a legalistic worldview. But what happens when that worldview is governed more by appeals to our moral foundations than by appeals to Holy Scripture? We’ve witnessed a shocking amount of “moving goalposts” and “flip-flopping” from religious leaders recently, particularly in the evangelical churches that are the most politically engaged. Acts that have drawn their profound and righteous anger in the past, such as adultery and deception, are suddenly deemed tragic but forgivable, and therefore dismissible or even defensible.

In this we can see that pre-rational moral judgments leveraged for political campaigning can remove both the source of our values (theology) as well as the end result (policy). The values conversation that takes place in political campaigning feeds back into religious communities, replacing the role of authoritative truth with triggering messaging that can change from one day to the next without losing effectiveness. The consequences for ethical formation are disastrous. What is ethical becomes whatever serves the values we uphold, and the values we uphold are largely dependent on what values are being triggered by the political messaging of the endless campaign — usually a kind of defensive “whataboutism” that scapegoats the opposing party rather than acknowledging any fault in our own. We end up with a much smaller chain of relationship between religion and politics, which loops back:

religion → ethics? → politics → religion
 (values) → (whataboutism) → (values) → (values)

Two Roads

This unhealthy relationship between religion and politics can go in two very different directions. In America we see a resurgence of religious nationalism. Church leaders rally around the President even as they abandon the moral and ethical tenets that previously defined Christian faith and life in order to justify their political position. Evidently, when political tribalism subverts ethics and replaces Scripture and theology as the source of religious values, religious nationalism is the outcome.

In Canada we see a bland secularism that fights for the right to express religious values publicly, and at the same time ensures that those religious values are tolerably vacant of real, substantive content. Conservative politicians valiantly proclaim a personal Christian morality opposed to abortion and gay marriage, but never actually talk about Christ. We are left with a religion composed almost entirely of moral judgments, but without any basis for real ethics, and a politics that ostensibly rejects religion as a basis for policy, but relies on those moral judgments to frame campaigns.

Conclusion

Values are deeply rooted, often unconscious, and more powerful than we care to admit. If they are not intentionally formed from authoritative sources in ethical communities, they can flounder. If they are not formed into concrete policies through the crucible of political engagement, they feed back into an endless and increasingly divisive campaign. Without a healthy flow from truth through ethics to policy, developed and expressed through religious and political institutions, they have the power to upend those institutions, and society itself.

References

- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Random House.
- Beinart, Peter. 2018. "Why Trump Supporters Believe He Is Not Corrupt." *The Atlantic*, August 22. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/what-trumps-supporters-think-of-corruption/568147/>