

## Religion, Politics, and Philanthropy

Robert Payton

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"Political and social problems were his major concern, and what gave his politics such strength was the religious insight he brought to bear on them. For him politics and religion were always intertwined... As much as social protest was for him a religious experience, religion without indignation at political evils was also impossible."

That quotation is not from an admiring testimonial to Pat Robertson but from Susannah Heschel about her father, Abraham Heschel. Although I have long admired Heschel and feel contempt for Robertson, pairing the two men makes life difficult for me. They share a view that I resist -- I was opposed to the political theology of liberal Christianity and I oppose the political theology of conservative Christianity.

My concern is the defense of religion: mixing religion and politics subverts religion. Religion and politics are different and the differences are important. If we undermine the integrity of the one in behalf of the other we will have lost something old and valuable, not gained something new and valuable.

If I take that stand, how do I justify the blending of religion and philanthropy? If philanthropy's roots are to be found deepest in religious tradition, and religious tradition has always included prophecy -- the war against evil and the struggle for righteousness -- how can I complain about the modern versions? Heschel fought for social justice; Robertson claims his enemy is moral decay: what are the important differences between them other than the quality of style and the content of their agenda. I should support one and oppose the other on those terms, not on some flimsy argument that religion and politics don't mix.

For religion to accomplish its theological purposes, it must enter the public square and fight its battles with all the other gods and devils, the moneylenders and heathen, the blasphemers and bigots. Or so the argument goes.

"Religion" means two other things: one is captured for me in the word piety, a deep personal sense of the holy, capturing both respect for God's law and an awed humility for

his power. Such notions are intensely personal, growing out of prayerful reflection on the testing extremes of direct, lived experience. They are intended to suggest that aspect of religion best symbolized for me by someone on his knees, praying.

The second aspect of religion that is relevant here is that of community: religion as it occurs with others in congregation. Religion in this social dimension has its pious thread; there is a sense in which one picks up something from collective experience -- somewhat in the way the historian William McNeill talks about the communal aspect of dancing.

The social dimension of greatest importance to philanthropy is the effort to use the congregation as an instrument of social action.

The religious congregation is the most extraordinary organizational unit I know; I know of no other that can compare with it. The congregation is a place where people come together frequently to learn why it is they come together frequently.

The congregation does its work in the community as a religious obligation to help others. In some cases it is a recruiting device, a means of bringing others into the fold or toward the struggle for salvation-missionary work. (Forgive the Christian, Protestant tone of all this; I hope the point has larger applicability.)

A society made up of people with strong religious beliefs is a stronger society -- unless the strong beliefs come into conflict, and then religion is a source of division rather than unity.

In plural societies like the United States, the religious congregation is important -- religion itself is important -because of its work in the community, especially in activities that serve the weak, oppressed, and vulnerable. The work of traditional charity at its best is the highest form of human endeavor, at least in a moral sense, and self-giving to help others in need commands respect. The worst betrayals -- the Jim Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggarts; the most offensive attacks -Christopher Hitschens on Mother Teresa -never do more than cause charity to skip a beat. There is a deep-seated acceptance of the value of helping others that resists all the failures and exposes and disappointments.

If such an impression has any validity, then I am right in arguing that the core value of all philanthropy is that one -- that capacity for concern and that response to the needs of others less fortunate. That value is nurtured, taught, inculcated, infused into individuals

who become part of almost all religious traditions. In the American -- or is it western, or is it Christian - tradition of congregational social action, it provides a social ethic that is constantly tested and reinforced.

For most people, it seems to make a difference to believe that helping others is doing God's work.

The first ethical question -- What is going on? -- that I continually return to, requires the congregation to learn about what is going on within its own community, among the people outside the congregation who represent a moral claim for help. Very often that question is answered by reports of suffering or deprivation or injustice or misfortune. Some of the suffering and injustice seems to result from the actions of others, perhaps from flaws or failures in the system of the community itself.

Some people are homeless and out of work; some within congregations claim that the fault for their plight lies not with the people themselves but with the politicians or the business executives. [The young girl brutalized by her mother in New York; what is her name? Will she become the welfare equivalent of Kitty Genovese? Has someone already written that?]

Most congregational activity is irenic rather than confrontational. Most people enjoy working in soup kitchens and homeless shelters but are fearful of political action. No volunteer likes to be attacked as a convenient target by those being helped. Most people are not prepared to be martyrs in behalf of the poor and downtrodden; most are not ready even to fight; and few have the calling or the genius to be prophets.

At the margins of religious life is where one finds the stressful conflict of change and calls for revolution. The mainstream of charity is a peaceful enterprise, and perhaps less effective because of that.

In one sense, certainly; well-run homeless shelters do little to diminish the social problem of homelessness. In another sense, there may be no more important bond than that between the anonymous volunteer and the anonymous victims of hard times.

The sturm und drang of prophetic rhetoric is what we hear and read most about. Names like those of Billy Graham, Fulton Sheen, and Harold Kushner may be familiar to us, but we are not shaken by them unless we fall under their spell. It is possible to live a full life and never be touched by the drama and charisma of an Elijah Mohammad or a Jesse Jackson or a Mother

Teresa. The common experience is the ordinary one, the annual collecting and sorting of clothing for the poor, the weekly delivery of flowers from the altar to the patients in the hospital, the regular run in the car to bring food to the disabled.

The staying power of religious philanthropy then, in this way of thinking about it, is that it continues because it falls within a zone of personal discomfort and sensitivity that can be eased or resolved by occasional response, by discretionary action.

Prophets are those who see such placid acceptance of charity as sinful or illusory or even corrupt. Prophets are those who would mobilize the religious congregation into an instrument of social change, reform, or even revolution. Great awakenings happen, and the successful prophet is he or she who can claim to have caused one.

One of the paradigm cases is Mahatma Gandhi, another stranger who managed to bring alien ideas into our culture and to be admired and thanked for doing so. He gave a strategy to Martin Luther King, a strategy of peaceful protest and nonviolent resistance that enabled us to create a new political concept of civil rights without a civil war. And, to bring out the parochialism of my own examples, Gandhi worked without a tradition of "congregation" in the western sense. What he did that was compatible was to bring social change directly into the personal lives of people whether they wanted to be affected by his ideas or not. Typical philanthropic imperialism.