

Wonder

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Title: **Orthodoxy and The Political Left** Author: **Fr. John Culbreath-Frazier**

When considering our faith in relation to any political structure, there is a perennial hesitancy in our pluralistic society to equate the two. The concept of safeguard in separation of church and state is something we cherish, with the intention that our government will be *of the people, by the people, and for the people* and not cater to any specific religious ideology. However, whenever you authentically engage another individual, it is impossible not to also engage their beliefs to a certain extent. So when considering the question of our faith, Christianity, we should not be asking how we can effectively root religion out of politics, but how can the Christian faith be an effective, and healthy, influence on political policy?

The political “right” is often criticized as having taken full advantage of the religious fervor of the American people, particularly among conservative and evangelical Christians. To the credit of the “right”, what it has done very well is set itself up as the perceived religious, and effectively moral, compass of our country. Catering to perhaps the most powerful Christian contingent in American society, the evangelical Christians, it has sought to become the “party” largely of this demographic. This, on the other hand, leads to our criticism of the political “left”- their overall reluctance to engage the American public on a religious level and to remind us that as Christians it is possible to be progressive and pro-life. Simply put, the Democrats have allowed the Republican Party to set the parameters of the religious debate, and consequently have allowed many Republican platforms to acquire religious connotations.

There is no denying that in the political “left” there is a refusal to engage the “right” on the religious playing field regarding policy. By refraining from this discussion, they have given the “right” a monopoly on making any stance a religious issue. This, of course leads to a political dynamic where there is very little to discuss from a religious perspective and definitely no room for dialogue. This is best seen in the way all of Christian ethics in the political sphere are largely simplified to such charged issues as abortion and gay marriage, and placing little, if any, emphasis on how our faith may also approach such topics as the environment, poverty, and human rights; issues that have equal religious significance.

Using abortion as an example, which often serves as a political gauge during a candidate’s campaign, this topic very easily becomes focused on the issue of the overwhelmingly difficult choice during pregnancy, rather than the alternatives which would support both mother and her unborn child. If the political “left” took more time to observe their relevancy to the Christian voters, those who hold fast to the sanctity of life being a gift from God, they could address such religious sentiments through programs aimed at building up the community so it may effectively address the concerns of teen pregnancy, discuss adoption reform, and provide support for low-income women. The political “left”, by realizing that abortion is not only about this choice, and the right to that choice, but also about engaging a vulnerable group in our society, can begin to enter into this religious dialogue with the “right”. Our Christian faith has more to say on the topic

of abortion than simply concerning the life of an unborn child, and the willingness of the “left” to address these concerns will be an indicator of their engagement in such a dialogue.

But the issue of abortion is not unique unto itself. Through this reassessment by the “left”, what will hopefully occur is a realization that many of the issues that define their political policy can be in fact Christian ideals. With an emphasis on social equality and justice, we are reminded of the Orthodox perspective on the human person; that all of humanity is made in the image of the Creator and the charge of Christians to recognize this image. One does not have to look too far back into American history to realize that the “left” became politically involved in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, lead by black churches in the American South; as well, they were present in several other social movements lead by faith-based organizations, such as the abolition of slavery and acquiring of women’s suffrage.

We as Christians, especially as Orthodox Christians, know our God to be communal yet personal, but He has never been an isolated deity encompassed by a singular political perspective. Just as the Republican Party is often accused of distilling faith into the various categories of their political policy, the Democrat Party can be easily accused of allowing this religious dialogue to remain personal and relativist without ever attempting to enter on a religious level. What is most upsetting of all is that the political “left” has allowed the “right” to decide which platforms will be religious issues, then use these issues to gain political influence. To engage in this dialogue would be to argue that a compassionate concern for all who reside in affluence or on the margins is always necessary. It is our faith that encourages us to provide opportunities- such as health care, education, and economic security; it is not a left/right platform (though they disagree on how to provide these), but a Christian standard.

Much of the divide between the right and left, although in some form is applicable to many of their stances, can be seen in their approach to social issues. The “left”, largely, views the rights of a person to be a more social, or community, responsibility, while the “right” views these to be individually based and driven largely by justice. For example, the needs of a person in one viewpoint would be the concern of the broader community, while the other would put more stress on individual success, the lack of which may be due to an underlying cause specific to that person.

Speaking to the hesitancy of political involvement in these Christian standards, even the fourth century Saints John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea spoke of the responsibility the wealthy have for the economically disenfranchised. And many of the social programs they enacted came not only from their own wealth, but also from the financial and political support of their government- which had very deep pockets. Similarly, our American political system, through its various programs, is able to be a valuable resource in expressing these Christian truths.

Right now, our American government is in the midst of an intense debate regarding such financial issues as spending, the extension of previously-established tax cuts, and the overwhelming deficit in our national budget. Even as this saga unfolds before our eyes, we see both the “right” and “left” heatedly discuss what is to happen with what we have “rendered to Caesar”. And with the scare of a government shut down, we see a bi-partisan government that is unwilling to engage in an authentic dialogue over what we, as Christians, consider to be a

blessing from God. This, like our discussion on abortion, is not an isolated issue. To provide the opportunities of healthcare and education to all citizens, regardless of economic standing, we must first consider how we can be faithful stewards of our financial blessings. As each side argues strongly as to how to best achieve this goal, our faith charges us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). These are not only the words of the Old Testament Law, but also came from the lips of Christ. And when our political dialogue is tempered with these words, we realize that our actions as a government are to not only bring glory to God, but also are to be done in service to his creation. It is entering upon this dialogue that the “right” and “left” begin to speak authentically from a Christian perspective.

Not every Christian in the United States is of one mind, even when discussing our faith. And our beliefs should not become the political slogan of a particular party. As the political “left” responds to this religious engagement, realizing that many of the moral issues of the “right” are equally applicable to many of the policies of the “left”, the result will be a political party that seeks to fulfill not only the communal aspects of their political stances, but perhaps even the view of Christianity toward our neighbor.

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Discussion Questions:

Should the author’s suggested solutions to the abortion problem be functions of government or of the Church?

Likewise, should social programs and care for the poor be managed via government agencies or the Church? Has the government stepped in because the Church has not provided any meaningful ministry to the poor and needy?

How do we Christians view society and the function of government, to protect the rights of individuals or value what is best for the community?