

Religion and Politics

The beginning of an ongoing series of articles for Oregon's Future

The Common Good

by Phillip Kennedy-Wong, Ecumenical Ministries

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH IN THE news lately about religion in politics. From President Bush's courtship of Christian conservatives to Senator John Kerry's relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, and here in Oregon, the ballot measure to legally define marriage, all highlight the intersection of religion and politics.

While some argue that we should not allow religion to become entangled in politics, others argue that religion is central to our nation's well being, if not our very salvation. Like it or not, religious groups have a moral imperative and a legal right to be politically active and can play a constructive role in the political process without violating the US Constitution. For many, including Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, where I am the public policy director, political involvement is central to the belief systems of our member denominations. For us the key question is not whether religion should be politically active but how.

Religious groups do not insert themselves into the political process uninvited. In July 2004 the Republican National Committee sponsored a free luncheon for Christian pastors in Eugene to discuss the important role clergy have played in shaping American history and the US Constitution. Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon invited Reverend Dr. James Forbes from New York City's Riverside Church to kick-off our non-partisan voter registration drive. Shortly after, the Democratic National Committee decided to invite him to speak at its convention.

As a political representative for a religious organization, I am often told that religious groups should only be involved in providing social services and not advocating policy. Even parishioners tell me that the church should just stay out of politics. To which I reply, "Charity is kind but not always just." Our involvement in politics is primarily about advocating for just policies, a necessary complement to acts of charity and compassion. Justice demands at times changing systems that cause the need for charity.

We have witnessed many injustices in Oregon. When we saw that low wages contributed to Oregon's high hunger rate, we sought to raise Oregon's minimum wage. When we saw global trade policies hurting small businesses, we sought safeguards for businesses and workers. When we saw that the high costs of prescription drugs made them inaccessible, we advocated for healthcare reforms. Presently, the Oregon tax system's burden on the working poor is unjust—the state taxes income below the federal poverty level at its top rate of nine percent. Taxation should be based on ability-to-pay relative to obtaining the basic necessities of life, i.e. nutritious food, housing, health care, and clothing. For all the vaunted benefits of the free market, the private sector does not or cannot create enough jobs that support a family or provide affordable healthcare. Neither the private nor the public sectors should be immune from moral analysis and religious persuasion.

We certainly do believe in separation of church and state, a principle critical to religious freedom. We also recognize that both government and the market are vehicles open to moral corruption and human fallibility. It is precisely the role of religious groups to provide moral guidance to people in power, especially to our political and economic decision-makers.

Our laws, elected officials, public services, government budgets, and business practices reflect societal values. When there is an economic recession, as Oregon has experienced in the last three years, who can receive a

**REMEMBER:
One person's waste can be another person's valued service.**

public education or afford college, who gets released early from jail, and who can afford healthcare? The answers to these questions become pronounced moral decisions. These decisions demand civic engagement from all parts of society, especially the religious community. Providing charity is simply not enough to meet our religious calling. Our political advocacy centers on advocating for just systems that protect the least among us and promote the common good.

Religion and politics can yield positive results in Oregon. In 2002, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon joined with the Oregon Catholic Conference, the Oregon Food Bank, Associated Oregon Industries and, the Oregon AFL-CIO in supporting legislation to extend jobless benefits to the

state's high number of unemployed. In 2003, an interfaith group of religious institutions and charities formed the Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger. Members included Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In communities across the state, similar efforts are being made. As long as there are social needs in Oregon, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and other religious groups will continue to advocate for justice and to exercise compassion thereby benefiting the lives of all Oregonians.

And now the 2004 election season is upon us. From the presidential race, control of the Oregon Senate, to the ballot measures, there is much at stake. How might we approach these decisions that take into account Oregon's future? Let me suggest that first and foremost we consider the "oikumene", the Greek word for the whole society, the common good.

Contrary to libertarian notions, the common good is not necessarily the sum of individual good but the greater good that can be achieved as a society when we seek outcomes greater than self-interests. There must be a nobler cause than the dislike of government and taxes. The common good embraces the concept that by working together we can eliminate some of the social problems of the world.

With this principle in mind, we are thus able to approach a candidate or ballot measure differently. Instead of asking, "Am I personally better off if I vote for this candidate or ballot measure?" ask "Are we better off, especially those in need?" Does a candidate believe in identifying Oregon's needs and then seeking the resources? Or does the candidate believe in limiting government

spending regardless of need? Does the candidate believe that reforming Oregon's tax system is needed to secure important public services? Or does the candidate believe in budgeting according to available resources? When politicians speak of government waste, do they mean government has different priorities from theirs or that government is inefficient? Remember one person's waste can be another person's valued service.

We can also apply the common good to this election's ballot measures. Measure 37 mandates that governments must pay property owners or forgo enforcement when certain land use restrictions reduce property value. How does this affect the balance between public good and the individual

good? Measure 34 is a proposal that will change how state coastal forests are managed. How does this affect conservation, timber harvests, clean water, and Oregon's outdoor way of life? Does Measure 35 improve or limit access and quality of health-care? How does Measure 36 affect religious liberty and certain legal rights accorded to married couples? And should we let the dislike of government or recent mismanagement prompt us to abolish SAIF under Measure 38 regardless of how it would impact

44,000 employers that use it? These questions help to bring religion and politics into constructive engagement. We encourage people to use their faith as a guide, but ultimately they are endowed with their own conscience.

Lastly, religion provides a moral understanding to our political and economic decisions in life. As mentioned earlier, religious groups should continue to be involved in politics and yet should always be wary of being co-opted for political gain.



Phillip Kennedy-Wong became Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Director of Public Policy in January 2002. EMO's mission includes public policy advocacy, community ministry, and theological education and dialogue. Kennedy-Wong received a Masters in Public Policy from Rutgers University. Kennedy-Wong is a graduate of Western State Center's Western Institute for Leadership and Development, a yearlong mentor program for community organizers working in the social justice movement. He also served six years in the US Marine Corps Reserves.

Guarding the Borderline Between Church and State

by Frank L. Pasquale, PhD

IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO GAIN broad agreement in the United States to the propositions that:

- Religion should not be used by government, or publicly elected representatives, for partisan political gain;
- Government should not be used by religions for their institutional gain; and
- All citizens as private citizens should enjoy freedom of religious beliefs, practices, and expression (as long as these do not violate reasonable civil laws that protect the rights and well-being of others).

But *applying* such principles is much more difficult than stat-

ing them. It is also not difficult to agree that civic and political engagement is the right and duty of every citizen, individually or in association with others. As Phillip Wong notes elsewhere in this issue, such engagement is often motivated and guided by religious convictions. This is a moral responsibility, and the morals of many grow out of their religious beliefs.

Now comes the hard part. How do we exercise our rights and duties in ways that do not violate the very principles that ensure them? When do the religious expressions of citizens who happen to be elected representatives reflect the free exercise of religious expression or moral con-

viction by private citizens, and when do they become coercive government advocacy of selected religious faiths? When are church-members and clergy exercising their rights and duties of civic and political engagement as private citizens, and when are they—as institutions—exerting partisan political influence that is simply a bid for power over government and fellow citizens? When are political parties using church membership lists only to encourage citizens to vote, and when are they simply using selected churches to secure votes for their candidates?

The thing about borderlines is that there are always places and ways to get around them or to surreptitiously violate them.

It was the Constitutional framers' conclusion that a critical degree of distance or separation between the institutions of church and state is necessary to preserve our rights of conscience, religious exercise, and expression. A more apt metaphor than a wall for this distance is a borderline, or a buffer or neutral zone. It is not straight or neat. In some areas, its most reasonable location is difficult to decide. It is established by mutual consent and it is preserved only to the extent that we exercise restraint and respect in the exercise of our rights.

To make this principle work, citizens-as-church-members must resist the temptation to use their churches as instruments of partisan politics—even as they draw from their religious convictions to motivate and guide their moral

and political actions as individuals. To make the principle work, citizens-as-public officials must resist the temptation to use their offices to gain political advantage for their particular faith—even as they personally draw on that faith to help guide their choices as citizens and representatives.

Unfortunately, such restraint has eroded noticeably in recent years. There are mounting examples of citizens, both inside and outside churches and government, increasingly blurring, threatening, ignoring, or violating even a reasonable borderline between church and state.

- There are reports nationwide of clergy who move far beyond the encouragement of moral and religious principles. Some, perhaps many, church members are urged to support those principles with votes for particular candidates.
- Membership lists of churches thought to be favorable to a candidate are solicited by political parties ostensibly for “voter registration” purposes. There are no safeguards against merging those lists with others and using them to solicit contributions or votes for their candidates. *Step by step, the line is blurred.*
- Repeated attempts are mounted in Congress to enact bills (such as H. R. 2357 and H. R. 235) that would remove current restrictions and allow churches to openly engage in partisan electioneering and politicking. *The line is threatened.*
- Religious advocates, judges, and politicians employ a series of strategies to achieve prominent displays of the “Judeo-Christian Commandments” in public schools, courthouses, and government offices. *The line is ignored.*
- President Bush’s “faith-based initiative” (by executive order, when Congress would not approve it) redirects citizens’ taxes for the promotion of particular religious beliefs (overwhelmingly Christian) through various programs and services. *The line is violated.*

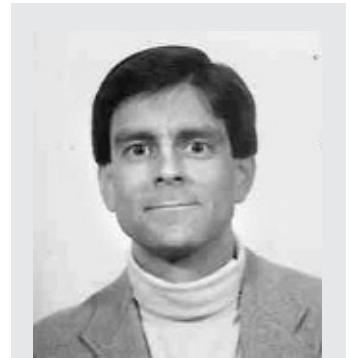
The history of church-state relations in the United States has always been charged with tension. This tension was codified into law in the First Amendment’s Establishment and Free Expression clauses. The principle was unarguable: by protecting church from state and state from church, the rights of religious exercise and expression among all citizens are best secured. But what couldn’t be codified into law were the measures of reasonableness and restraint needed to make the principle work for the benefit of all.

The people of Oregon had a close encounter in 2001 with a bill (Senate 746) to allow the prominent posting of the “Ten Commandments” in our public schools and government offices. Our legislators defeated it by a narrow margin. The State of Oregon has so far weathered assaults on its “Death with Dignity” act by federal government officials, some of whom are motivated by religious convictions that only their God has the right of control over citizens’ own lives. Our courts rebuffed them.

Oregon clergy were recently visited by David Barton, author of *The Myth of [church-state] Separation*, “who heads a group...that promotes a close relationship between Christianity and government” (*The Oregonian*,

7/21/04). He is also deputy chairman of the Texas Republican Committee, and his lectures here and elsewhere are funded by the Republican National Committee. He clearly aims to energize and enlist conservative church-members on behalf of the incumbent, but he is careful to stop just short of stating this. He tells churches how to push their political participation to the line, but take care to stop just short of the letter of Constitutional and tax law.

The thing about borderlines is that there are always places and ways to get around them or to surreptitiously violate them. The more we play such games with our principles or push our “rights” to the limit and beyond, the less



Frank L. Pasquale has, since 2001, been engaged in research, writing, and lecturing on culture, morality and ethics, the “non-religious” in the United States, and the relationship between religion and government. He earned an M. A. and Ph.D. in cultural anthropology at Northwestern University and an M. S. in social psychology at Western Washington University. He was a Research Fellow at the East-West Center where he studied cultural patterning of communication in Japan, China, and the United States. He resides in Portland, Oregon, where he hopes to continue his scholarly pursuits in an academic setting.

likely the borderline will hold, keep the peace, and protect citizens' reasonable rights. One can hope that the citizens of Oregon will continue to recognize the dangers of pushing their politics to the limit as church members and representatives, and pushing their religion to the limit as government officials. Use of government by religions bodes poorly for the rights and freedoms of citizens of other religions, or of none. Use of churches or religions by government bodes poorly for their autonomy and integrity.

As James Madison observed, "there remains in [some] a strong bias . . . that without some sort of alliance or coalition between Government and Religion neither can be duly supported. Such indeed is the tendency to such a coalition, and such its corrupting influence on both the parties, that the danger cannot be too carefully guarded against." Religion will always be involved in politics, and vice versa, through the individual citizens who make up our churches and governments. The critical questions are always "to what extent" and "in what ways?"

The real enemy of a humane society is not religion; it is rather corporations and politicians using religion as a front for their own interests.

still be disagreements, such as the continuing debate on issues like Oregon's right-to-die initiative. Nevertheless, as the nation faces the immense challenges of war, international development,

environmental destruction and the increasing differences between the rich and poor, both groups can come together to promote the best for the whole society and the whole world.

riage which is the promiscuity blatantly advertised by commercial interests in nearly every sitcom. From a high moral center they should challenge those opposing gay marriage to be just as politically active in opposing the commercialization of sex.

The ultimate religious issue in this political year is between personal and social ethics. With few exceptions the religious right wishes the government to enforce their views on personal ethics such as abortion, homosexuality, and the teaching of personal ethics through a public display of the Ten Commandments and prayer in the public schools. By turning to the government to coerce and educate the public to their views of morality, the churches of the right are confessing that they have been unsuccessful in reaching the public through their own preaching and teaching. Since they have failed, they look to the government to do what they have been unable to accomplish.

Secular humanists and mainline Christians would agree that personal ethics on debatable issues are the province of the churches and the conscience of individuals. The real role of religion in the political debate should be on the policies which deal with issues of discrimination, social justice, and war. On these issues a majority of people will find consensus and agreement. There will

THE DIVIDED CENTER

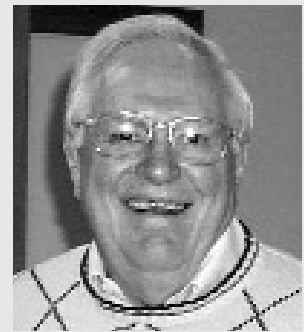
by Robert Schmidt, PhD

One of the tragedies of the church/state debate is that it has divided the political center. **Excessive disagreement over the role of religion in politics divides moderates against one another.** Political candidates who openly appeal to the religious center and left, are roundly criticized by secularists who would otherwise support them. At the same time, more secular candidates who argue against the inroads of religion in the national debate alienate religiously-oriented people who would otherwise support them. This division of the center has enabled the religious right to represent themselves as the champions of righteousness in the so-called culture war for the soul of our society.

Why is it that the religious right can afford almost non-stop

religious broadcasting while the religious center has few supporters? Financial interests have long bankrolled the religious right's political views and Republican candidates hope to benefit from their votes. Denominational rivalry between either mainline denominations or right wing evangelicals is no longer the problem. It is no longer the serious issue that prompted the high wall of separation between church and state at the end of the eighteenth century. The real enemy of a humane society is not religion; it is rather corporations and politicians using religion as a front for their own interests.

When evangelicals oppose marriage of gays in the name of preserving the family, they may be sincere. Mainline Christians ought to point the finger at the real problem undermining mar-



Robert Schmidt has taught International Relations, Theology, and World Religions at Concordia University in Portland. He has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Washington. He also has several graduate degrees in Theology from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. He taught in a seminary in Nigeria and served as a Campus Pastor at Colorado State University and the University of Washington. He has lectured in Zimbabwe, Germany, Japan, China, Kazakstan, and India and traveled in Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Mexico. He is currently studying and lecturing on the relationship between religion, politics, and world conflicts.