

Religion and Liberal Democratic Politics: Are they Philosophically Compatible?

Dr. John W. Ray, Professor, Liberal Studies Department, Montana Tech of the University of Montana

Abstract

American government is based on liberal democratic political theory as reflected in the political philosophies of John Locke, John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. American society has also been overtly religious. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*: “the religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States.” Since colonial times, religion and politics have intermingled in the United States, not always happily or tolerantly. Religion is still a potent force in American politics. What Leo Strauss called the “theologico-political problem” still exists.

This paper examines the philosophical compatibility of religion and politics in the following areas:

1. The Nature of Truth
2. Epistemology
3. View of Human Nature
4. Definition of Freedom
5. Nature of Legitimate Political Authority
6. Nature of Political Means and Ends
7. Nature of Decision-Making

Based on an examination of the political philosophies of Locke, Mill, Rousseau, Hegel, Emerson and Rawls, the paper reaches the conclusion that, philosophically, in terms of the above areas, adherence to a liberal democratic political ideology is fundamentally incompatible with a religious grounding of political reality.

Text of Paper

The Last time we mixed religion and politics, people got burned at the stake. Bumper sticker

Error has no rights. Syllabus of Errors

Since colonial times, religion and politics have intermingled in the United States. Several colonies were founded in large part for religious reasons. The secular nature of American government and separation of church and state were important issues during the debate on the Constitution.

Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*: “On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things.”(de Tocqueville 1956, 319) As an example of religious fervor, during the presidential campaign of

Forum on Public Policy

James Garfield in the 19th Century, campaign signs touted: “Vote for Garfield, he is pure and holy.” More recently, religious affiliation was a volatile issue in President Obama’s first campaign. “By all the normal yardsticks of religious commitment—the strength of religious institutions, practices, and belief—the United States has resisted the pressures toward secularity. Institutionally, churches are probably the most vital voluntary organization in a country that puts a premium on ‘joining up’.” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 9.)

“Americans overwhelmingly (67%) consider the U.S. a Christian nation. A decade ago, Americans were somewhat less likely to tie the nation’s identity to Christianity. In 1996, 60% considered the U.S. a Christian nation. By 2002, however, the figure had climbed to 67%, and since then views on the question have remained fairly consistent. (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, August 24, 2006) “Overwhelmingly, Americans favor more, not less religion in the country.” (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, August 24, 2006)

There is a strong correlation between religiosity and partisan political affiliation. “Religiousness is highly correlated with political orientation in the U.S. today. Republicans are on average significantly more religious than Democrats.” (Gallup Poll, February 2, 2011.)

Definition of Religion

The word religion comes from the Latin *religare*: to tie up, restrain or to bind and, perhaps, *religio* meaning respect or fear of what is sacred. “Formal religion-variously described as official, institutional or organized—comprises official religious doctrines that are determined by specialized religious organizations and implemented by trained religious professionals. The doctrines are conveyed to believers through symbols, liturgy and other rituals.” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 26.) Religions have institutions, creeds that express the formal beliefs of a religious group, devotions and rituals, codes of behavior and sacred texts. Religion provides answers as to what is the nature and purpose of existence particularly as these relate to a divine being and how people should behave. Religion provides a world view and an explanation of how human beings fit into this world view.

When I am speaking about religion, I am not talking about personal ethical or moral codes. I am distinguishing between religious dogmas and commands and ethical and moral precepts. I am also not concerned, for purposes of this paper, with evaluating the moral codes or basis underlying organized religion. My focus is on the effect of organized religion on the flourishing of liberal democratic politics and the compatibility of organized religion, which seeks to limit the range of acceptable choices for the members of its congregations, with liberal democracy. My focus, for purposes of this paper, will be upon organized, main-line Christian denominations in the United States.

Definition of Liberal Democracy

In a liberal democracy, emphasis is placed on the individual, freedom of thought and expression, toleration of differing political views and opinions based on the contingency of political truth, public deliberation on matters of national policy, majority rule while respecting minority rights and pluralism whereby “public policy is the product of group conflict, and that the public interest tends to emerge out of the welter of competing individual and group claims.”(Plano and Greenberg 1985, 172) The assumption underlining the above characteristics of liberal democracy is that there is no fixed political truth to be

discovered or discerned. As Aristotle said, political truth exists in the realm of the probable and the contingent and is the product of discourse and debate.

Influence of Religion on American Politics

Religious beliefs have political significance and are salient factors in determining public policy preferences and action. “People act politically, economically, and socially in keeping with their ultimate beliefs. Their values, mores, and actions, whether in the polling booth, on the job, or at home, are an outgrowth of the god or gods they hold at the center of their being.” (Robert Swierenga quoted in Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 37)

Although declining in the past few years, a majority of Americans still report that religion is a “very important” part of their life. (*Pew Global Attitudes Project*, “U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion.” January 2007.) One third of Americans subscribe to a literal interpretation of the Bible. (Jacoby, Susan, “Religion remains fundamental to US politics,” *The Times*, October 31, 2008.) In general, the less educated a person is the more likely he or she is to subscribe to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 45% of Americans with no education beyond high school subscribe to a literal interpretation of the Bible. As education increases, fundamentalism decreases. (Susan Jacoby, “Religion remains fundamental to US politics,” *The Times*, October 31, 2008.)

In general, the more religious a person is the more intolerant that person is likely to be of divergent political views. “. . . a reasonably well-established finding from decades of social science research is that those professing religious affiliation and beliefs tend to be more politically intolerant; that is, specifically, to be less willing to extend political rights to those whom they view as their political foes.” (Gibson, James L. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune report*, March 2, 2009.) This is particularly true of religious traditionalists, who make up about 31% of Americans. Traditionalists regularly attend church services, believe in God and the devil and see moving away from God as causing many of the world’s social problems. (Gibson, James L. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune report*, March 2, 2009.) “Religious traditionalism seems to be associated with a generalized propensity toward intolerance, not just intolerance of anti-religionists. Religious traditionalism makes an independent contribution to political intolerance. The data indicate that dogmatism certainly underlies intolerance and religious traditionalism. But even holding dogmatism and other variables constant, those holding traditional religious beliefs are more likely to be politically intolerant.” (Gibson, James L. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune report*, March 2, 2009.)

Americans tend to see a lack of religious commitment as a cause of many of the problems facing the country. “Most of the problems of this world result from the fact that more and more people are moving away from God.’ A substantial majority of Americans (61 percent) agree with this statement. (Gibson, James L. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune report*, March 2, 2009.) About 30% of Americans believe that religion should have more influence. 40 % of Republicans believe religion should have more influence and 47% of those identifying themselves as conservatives say religion should have more influence on American life. (*Gallup Poll*, February 2, 2011)

Biblical references improve the ethical appeal of presidential candidates and generate more positive attitudes toward a candidate. Religious appeals are effective “because of the prominent role of religion in the lives of many Americans. The United States is a particularly ‘churched’ nation; most Americans are exposed to religion early on in their lives, and many continually reencounter religious ideas and images as they grow up.” (Albertson, 2011. 127.)

Tea Party

41% of the electorate in the November 2010 elections were Tea Party supporters. (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. “The Tea Party and Religion,” February 23, 2011.) Tea Party members “are much more likely than registered voters as a whole to say that their religion is the most important factor in determining their opinions on social issues.” (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. “The Tea Party and Religion,” February 23, 2011.)

Fundamentalism and the Religious Right

People who adopt a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible believe religious rules, precepts and values should be reflected in public policy. “Earlier research found that while belief in God is not a particularly strong predictor of intolerance, belief in the devil is. Belief in the devil seems to be associated with the view that evil exists, that it represents an omnipresent threat and that one must be ever vigilant against it. Under such conditions, intolerance is perhaps a natural response.” (Gibson, James L. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune report*, March 2, 2009.)

“Six in Ten white evangelical Protestants say that the Bible should be the guiding principle in making laws when it conflicts with the will of the people.” (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics, August 24, 2011.) More than 50% of those who attend church services, not just fundamentalists, at least once a month hear partisan issues discussed. (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” August 24, 2006) “People who attend religious services frequently are more inclined to consider the Bible the ultimate source of legal authority, with 52% of those who attend at least once a week saying the Bible should be more influential. Two-Thirds who subscribe to a literal interpretation of scripture believe that the Bible should have more influence over American law than the will of the people.” (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* “Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics,” August 24, 2006)

Religion and Liberal Democracy: Are They Philosophically Compatible?

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of the nature of Social Truth

Religious truth is not the same as political truth i.e. that which is known religiously is not the same as that which is known politically. Religious truth tends to be dogmatic, absolute and certain. Liberal political truth tends to be contingent, changeable and the product of public deliberation, either directly or by elected representatives of the people.

Religion’s View of Truth

Forum on Public Policy

The religious view of truth is absolute, unchanging. While manifestations of the truth may change, the underlying truth does not. Acceptance or intuition is the way of gaining religious truth. Religious truth is discerned rather than produced through public debate and discussion. The religious view of truth is much like the Platonic view of truth—unchangeable, transcendent, imminent and deductive. Often religious truth is imparted to people by an authoritarian source and is accepted on the basis of that person's authority that is clothed in some kind of mystical sanction without any understanding on the part of the believer. The sources of authority could be Sacred Scripture, a religious leader and a person's own personal revelation/mystical intuition. The source of the truth makes the truth the truth. This is particularly true in terms of revealed truth of which the believer has no direct apprehension. The ordinary person is not capable of apprehending religious truth.

Liberal Democratic Political Truth

For the liberal democrat, political truth exists in the realm of the probable and the contingent. It is not a certain, fixed truth. What constitutes good public policy exists, as Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric*, in the realm of the probable and the contingent. One cannot expect the same degree of certainty in politics that one does in math or science. To search for such certainty is misplaced. Democratic political truth is not a priori truth. All ideas are to be subjected to public debate in the market place of ideas. The source of an opinion or inference does not automatically validate the opinion or inference.

Religion and Liberal Democratic Politics differ in terms of Epistemology

Religious Epistemology

The religious way of apprehending truth differs from the democratic political way of apprehending truth. The religious approach to discovering truth is inimical to the democratic method of discovering truth. From the religious perspective, if a person does not know the truth it may be because of ignorance or it may be because of a perverse will. If ignorance is the problem, instruct them, evangelize them, so that they may see the truth. If a person continues to have a perverse will, even after instruction, forcibly convert them or punish them. Error has no rights. (In mathematics, a wrong answer has no intrinsic value. It is wrong. A math student who consistently clings to a wrong answer is the victim of some perverse will or social pathology. The answer to a mathematical problem does not depend on a popular vote of those in class.) In terms of political decision making, religion seeks to impose certainty and exactness where it does not belong. The religious view is that truth is discovered or discerned. The validity of a religious truth exists independently of the person perceiving the truth and the human perception of the truth in no way impacts the truth. Religious truths are in a sense self-certifying or certified, ultimately, by authority. There is an *a priori* standard to which all practical activity must conform. Religion conflates knowledge and true belief. You don't have to know why you believe it. For example, for Catholics, the teaching authority of the Church, the *Magisterium*, is the ultimate source of truth. Dogmatism makes all deliberative questions judicial questions. This absolutism holds sway in terms of the Christian right. "A majority of Christian Right group members enter into any negotiations and deliberations convinced there is a single correct point of view on most policy matters." (Wilcox, "The Christian Right and Civic Virtue" quoted in Wolfe and Katznelson 2010 ,192)

Forum on Public Policy

Liberal Democratic Epistemology

Truth is created through the process of public deliberation. The source of truth is the individual. Political truth is discovered by deliberation. Deliberation assumes contingency. Deliberation has other standards for determining truth (such as public acceptance, majority rule, public reasons) rather than authoritative source. The deliberative process produces truth. Truth must be publicly verified. Through public debate and discussion the contingent social truth is created. The standards for right behavior are themselves chosen. For deliberation to work, citizens must be persuadable, i.e. open to new arguments and evidence and willing to change their minds if presented with compelling arguments on the other side. For deliberation to function properly there must be uncertainty as to what constitutes the truth. Political deliberation requires political provisionalism. (As Aristotle said in the *Rhetoric*: “About things that are as they are, no one who believes such wastes much time in deliberation.” (Aristotle, 1954. *Rhetoric*, translated by W. Rhys Roberts, *Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics*, p. 27) Minority rights rest on tolerance of diversity and diverging views. If political truth is absolute, why grant those who do not agree any rights at all, they are in error and error has no rights. Political deliberation assumes contingency not absoluteness.

The difference between religious epistemology and democratic epistemology is in a broad sense the difference between an Aristotelian and Platonic epistemology.

Plato conflated ethics and epistemology by saying that to know the good is to do the good. Knowledge involves justifying your answer. Hegel echoed a view similar to Plato’s when he said that once the realm of thought has been revolutionized, reality cannot hold out. Later Christianity inserted the perverse will as the reason that people may know the good but not do the good. The good is immutable but people don’t always do the good or even know it. It is up to the Church to reveal the good which is not subject to debate or disagreement. The old Catholic expression is appropriate here: “Rome has spoken, the matter is settled.”

Aristotle disagreed with Plato that knowledge leads to action and added what came to be known as the faculty of choice and deliberation interposing itself between knowledge and action. This faculty became known as the will. For Aristotle, the will validly recognizes contingency and uncertainty in ethical, moral and political debates. Under Christianity, the will is only good if it conforms to the Church’s teaching.

Ethical statements use a value term such as good, moral, just, better, etc. while epistemological statements use terms such as it is warranted, it is reasonable, and it is demonstrated. The liberal democrat, who uses the standards of warrant, reasonableness and demonstration, would be intellectually open to criticism, not morally open to criticism, if they made an unwarranted, unreasonable statement. In democracy, if a person arrives at an unjustified epistemological statement we do not say that that person was morally blameworthy. In religion, we often do, particularly after being informed of the truth by the Church.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of underlying values.

Obedience is a prime religious value. Following the tenets and adhering to the precepts of one’s particular religion is a prime religious value. In addition to obedience, religion emphasizes Biblical authority, belief in God and conformity to God’s will as interpreted by a particular church. Traditionally the Christian religion sees human nature as fundamentally flawed and evil. Only obedience to the will of God as

Forum on Public Policy

expressed by His Church and the unmerited grace of God can save the fundamentally flawed human personality.

In contrast, liberal democratic politics emphasizes life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, the fundamental goodness of human nature, tolerance, personal freedom, the value of diversity and diverse opinion, the right to privacy, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of inquiry, freedom of speech and expression, the value of public deliberation as the best way of determining public policy, the rationality of people and popular sovereignty. The purpose of government is to protect these innate human rights. Hence, consent is the basis of legitimate political authority.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of the ends they pursue.

The end of religion is salvation in an afterlife. In order to achieve this salvation, one must submit to the commandments and demands of the particular religion. The Christian religion holds the key to eternal life. The life on earth is purely a transitional state. Obedience to the Church and following/practicing ritual becomes important in and of itself as the means of acquiring heaven. By contrast, the end of liberal democratic politics is the expedient in the sense of producing and providing safety, security, order, justice and the greatest good for the greatest number in this life. The rituals/procedures of democratic decision making are important only to the extent that adhering to these procedures produces good public policy. The procedures of liberal democratic decision making are seen as the best means of determining what should be public policy while protecting individual rights.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of view of human nature.

The religious view has been that government is a punishment for sin. If man had not sinned, there would be no need of government. The religious view is that human nature is essentially flawed. Only obedience to rightful higher authority can rescue the human beings from their flawed character. In contrast, the liberal democratic tradition is based on the view that there is a fundamental value, in and of itself, to the human person. The human being is basically rational and capable of quality decision making. Hence, in and of itself, the human person is worthy of respect. The worth of a human being does not depend on redemption by God. Therefore, people can rule themselves.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of decision making processes.

The religious view of decision making and deliberation is most closely allied to democratic centralism, in that there is an allowance for debate and discussion until a decision has been made by those in authority. Then dissent must cease. Of course, sometimes there isn't even dissent allowed before there is a decision. By contrast, the liberal democratic approach to decision making is that the best decisions regarding what constitutes good public policy comes from open public deliberation and debate. Since there are no fixed political truths to be discovered, the best public policy comes as a result of unfettered conflict between ideas with the majority determining which is best.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in definition of freedom.

Forum on Public Policy

The religious view is that true freedom comes from obedience to and acceptance of the dictates of higher authority. The view is that, since the higher religious authority is speaking in the name of God, obedience to that higher authority is really obedience to God—the only source of true freedom. By contrast, the liberal democratic view is that freedom means the absence of external constraints, self-determination and the ability to act on the basis of that self-determination as long as those actions do not impinge on the rights of others.

Religion and Democratic Politics differ in terms of what constitutes legitimate authority.

For religion, the source of legitimate authority is not popular consent. The kingdom of God is not a democracy. The covenant with God is between God and man with man submitting to the rule of God. Such is not the same as the social contract. The source of legitimate authority is God, the true sovereign, who imparts to government what legitimacy it has. In contrast, for the liberal democrat, consent of the governed is the basis of all legitimate political authority. The social contract between citizens by means of which the government is created as an artificial entity to accomplish certain goals such as security, order and justice is a utilitarian arrangement espousing the idea of popular sovereignty.

Summary: Religion and Liberal Democratic Politics Differences

Religion

1. Substantive
2. Private
3. Biased
4. Dogmatic
5. Seeks salvation of the individual
6. Transcendent focus
7. Negative view of human nature—fundamentally sinful and flawed. For religion, human nature is in need of redemption. Human beings cannot redeem themselves. Faith is needed.
8. Freedom consists of/comes from accepting the will of God. Obedience owed to God is not chosen.
9. Religious symbols
10. Intolerant
11. Religious myths (There are no religious myths extolling the virtues of democracy, consent, deliberation, etc.)
12. Covenant of God with the people is not the same as the social contract.
13. Fanatical
14. Religion often used to justify the status quo.
15. Authority based on private reasons (Rawls)
16. Deductive
17. Lack of civility in discourse.

Liberal Democratic Politics

1. Procedural

Forum on Public Policy

2. Private
3. Impartial
4. Contingent
5. Seeks the public good/general welfare.
6. Earthly focus
7. Positive view of human nature—people are capable, on their own, of realizing good.
8. Freedom consists of/comes from individual consent.
9. Democratic symbols
10. Tolerant/accepting
11. Democratic myths
12. Social contract is the basis of authority.
13. Reflective
14. Can be used to change the status quo.
15. Public policy based on rational justification and public reasons.
16. Inductive
17. Civility in discourse.

When religion and politics mix neither is well-served. Organized religion is incompatible with Liberal Democracy. While any attempt to limit religious political speech should be resisted as an abrogation of free speech, supporters of liberal democracy must be constantly vigilant when political debate is phrased in religious terms. In *Process and Reality*, Lord Alfred North Whitehead wrote: “When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers. The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered through the ages, uncertainly . . . The deep idolatry, the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rules, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar. . . . In the Galilean origin of Christianity is yet another suggestion. . . . It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it find purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved.” (Whitehead, 1929. 519-520.)

References

Albertson, Bethany L. 2007 “Religious Appeals and Implicit Attitudes,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 32, No 1, 2011, p. 127.

Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. 1954. Translated by W. Rhys Roberts, *Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics*, The Modern Library.

Gallup Poll, February 2, 2011)

Gallup Poll, February 2, 2011.

Gibson, James L. 2009. “Religion and Intolerance in Contemporary American Politics,” *Miller-McCune Report*, March 2.

Forum on Public Policy

Jacoby, Susan. 2008 "Religion remains fundamental to US politics," *The Times*, October 24.)

Pew Global Attitudes Project, January 2007. *U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion*.

Plano, Jack and Milton Greenberg, 1985. *The American Political Dictionary*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, August 24, 2011 *Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics*.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, February 23, 2011. "The Tea Party and Religion"

Tocqueville, Alexis de 1956. *Democracy in America*. The Henry Reeve Text as Revised by Francis Bowen. Now Further Corrected and Edited by Phillips Bradley, 319. New York: Vintage Books

Wald, Kenneth D. and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2011. *Religion and Politics in the United States* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publisher.

Whitehead, Alfred North 1929. *Process and Reality*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

Wolfe, Alan and Ira Katznelson, eds. 2010. *Religion and Democracy in the United States*. Princeton Press.