

So Help Me God

Sermon presented February 27, 2005
VUU Church by Jim Nielsen

In 1960, Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts campaigned to become US president. As a practicing Roman Catholic, there were many who thought that a Catholic could never become president. Senator Kennedy publicly stated that “his religion was a personal matter and that he believed very firmly in the separation of church and state and that he believed in an America where no Catholic prelate would tell the President how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote.” He won the election by a close margin and has been the only Catholic president in US history. In 2004, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, a practicing Roman Catholic, who also believed strongly in the separation of church and state, was openly criticized by many for not “being Catholic enough”.

In 1988, Margaret Thatcher, one of the most politically conservative politicians in British history, gave a sermon to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. For that she was pilloried by the British press and even by many of her own Conservative Party. That sort of thing is just not done by politicians in Britain! But isn't America supposed to be the land of separation of church and state, and Britain where the Queen is also the head of the Church of England?

In the 44 years since Kennedy ran for President, it would almost seem that either the nation has become more religious or that we expect our leaders to be more religious. Until the recent election, people scarcely remembered the religious views or practices of any president since Kennedy except for perhaps Jimmy Carter. Is there a religious litmus test developing for the electability our political leaders? Do our presidents need to be more religious now than in the past?

Nah. It's just politics, as usual.

Looking back through our presidential history, I found that there is a lot of literature available about the religions of our presidents although it can be difficult trying to pigeonhole many of them into a particular denomination. That is because someone may be born into a family church but then freely choose another later in life. There is also a difference between someone who is in sympathy with the creed of a particular denomination and someone who has become a communicant either through baptism or public profession of faith. As a result, there is a lot of disparity between tabulations of presidential religious affiliations. For what it's worth, I have settled on the following distributions.

11 of our presidents have been Episcopalians, 9 Presbyterians, 4 Methodist, 4 Baptist, 4 Unitarian, 3 Disciples of Christ, 2 Dutch Reformed, 2 Quaker, 1 Catholic, 1 Congregationalist, and several with no known religious affiliation at all. The Episcopalians and Unitarians are rather small denominations nowadays but their

representation in the presidency is significantly higher than all others. Most of our founding fathers were either Episcopalian or Unitarian. New England Unitarians were the most active members of the Independence movement in the 1770's. Most of the landed gentry from Virginia who authored the Constitution were members of the Anglican Church or Church of England which later became the Episcopal Church. They were the most dominant politically at that time even though they represented only a small portion of the population.

As a matter of fact, many small religions have been over-represented as presidents. There have been two Dutch Reformed presidents (Martin Van Buren and Teddy Roosevelt), and two Quaker presidents (Hoover and Nixon). Interestingly, Eisenhower was born into a family of Jehovah's Witnesses but his family tried to disguise this fact during his youth by saying they were River Brethren. Since they were both pacifist religious denominations, he obviously left the religion when he went to West Point. Of the two largest denominations in the US currently (the Catholics and Southern Baptists), they have some of the smallest representation as president. In Congress, however, Catholics are represented in almost the same percentage as the general population, as are Southern Baptists. In similar proportion, there are only three UUs in Congress.

One other thing stands out like a sore thumb. All of our presidents are of course white and male. But nearly every one has an Anglo-Saxon name. The closest thing to an ethnic name is Roosevelt. Most foreign countries (including many third world countries) have had a woman president or prime minister. This includes three Muslim countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan). Bangladesh has even had two. The only consolation is that they were just as authoritarian and corrupt as their male counterparts, however.

Interestingly, there were several presidents who maintained no religious affiliations at all. Some did so because they felt it was improper for the president to espouse any particular religion. Most attended religious services in the capital at a variety of different churches. Thomas Jefferson was most widely considered a non-believer. So much so that his opponents openly branded him as an atheist during the campaign of 1800. However, he attended religious services regularly because as he said: "no nation has yet existed or been governed without religion. I, as Chief Magistrate of this nation, am bound to give it sanction of my example".

Abraham Lincoln also had no specific affiliation and was even known during his years as a lawyer in Illinois to be a non-believer, yet he still attended church while president. When one devout Christian expressed hope that the Lord would be on our side during the Civil War, Mr. Lincoln retorted, "I am not concerned about that for I know the Lord is always on the side of what is right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and the nation should be on the Lord's side".

The one considered the least religious was Andrew Johnson. He was also considered the one to have been born into the worst poverty. He did not have an affiliation as a child and never adopted one as an adult. He attended church in Washington during his

administration but quit when he heard that many religious leaders were openly praying for his impeachment. Later in life he quietly attended the Catholic Church but never formally converted.

Many presidents can be considered to be among the most religious. John Adams was a very religious Unitarian and was also one of the most conservative of the leaders of the American Revolution. William McKinley was very openly religious and embraced his Methodism with a fervor that was unequaled by any president to that point. James Garfield was a lay preacher in the Disciples of Christ. Chester A Arthur was the son of a rural Baptist minister. Grover Cleveland was the son of a Presbyterian minister as was Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson was a very devout Christian such that he was considered by many as too God-centered. From what I have been able to determine, Wilson seems to be the president that most closely resembles our current president in terms of how his religion influences his political decisions. He was elected as a fluke because TR ran against Taft on the Bullmoose Party ticket, splitting the votes of the dominant Republican Party. Wilson brought his strong religious views into office and at the end of WWI went on an almost divine mission to remake the world order. However, he was a poor politician and could not rally the support of the US Congress behind his agreements including the league of Nations. Sigmund Freud was a contemporary of Wilson and commented that “the president believed himself to be akin to Jesus the Christ”.

Herbert Hoover lived his Quaker values both in religious tolerance and in dealing with the adversity that Great Depression brought to him. However, Hoover’s 1928 presidential campaign against Al Smith, the Irish Catholic governor of New York, was the slimiest in memory. “Rum, Romanism, and Ruin” was a campaign slur used against Smith, referring to the predilection of the Irish to alcohol and his Catholic religion. Lyndon Johnson was not well-known for his religiosity but he attended more Washington churches than any president before or since and did initiate the practice of having Billy Graham lead presidential prayer breakfasts. One of his top aides was an ordained Baptist minister named Bill Moyers. Jimmy Carter is considered to be the first “born-again” president and probably the most religious of them all. However, he was very careful to avoid any extreme display during his administration and rarely let his religion influence his political decisions. This, among other things, angered his faithful who supported his opponent in overwhelming numbers in 1980.

Were our Founding Fathers religious?

Our founding fathers were generally religious people. But almost every one of them went out of their way to avoid mixing politics and religion. The Federalist Papers have only two vague references to the word “religion” and the word “God” was not mentioned at all. As a matter of fact, the word God does not appear in the US Constitution. In the declaration of independence, Jefferson refers only to the Creator and to Nature’s God who has guaranteed the right of people to self-determination. Washington himself refused to partake of communion in the Anglican Church once the Revolution began in order to avoid any hint of complicity with the British. His religious comments tended to

be very broad and general which caused some to accuse him of not being Christian. Washington took the first oath of office for President in 1789 with his hand on the Bible. That was planned. What was not planned was that he ad-libbed the words: “So Help Me God”, at the end. That has been the tradition ever since.

I was intrigued by the writing of our founding fathers during this period. There were many references to the Divine, or the Divine Creator, or Divine Providence. This was common language among the Anglicans of the time, but it seemed almost Unitarian in its basic belief in God with little reference to Jesus. The first significant reference to Jesus by a President was by Andrew Jackson, the 7th president. The farther we get away from the American Revolution the more openly religious and openly Christian the presidents appeared. It did not mean presidents were not Christian, it was just that it was not common to refer to it in most personal and public activities.

Did they create this nation as a Christian nation?

Examining the prodigious amount of writing that was done by our Founding Fathers, it was clear that they were creating a secular government which allowed people to practice religion as they saw fit. At the time of the revolution, the predominant religious groups were the Congregationalists and Unitarians in New England, the Anglicans in New Jersey and coastal areas of Virginia and on south. There were also sizable communities of Quakers in Pennsylvania and Catholics in Maryland. The FF recognized that the American colonies were a refuge for many of the religious groups from England and from Europe who were forced out for their beliefs. The American Constitution was meant to protect the right to free exercise of their religious beliefs. There was never any intention to prescribe a particular set of beliefs. Nonetheless, aside from a small number of Portuguese and Spanish Jews who fled persecution in Europe and South America, all religious practitioners in the colonies were Christian. Thus, the prevailing culture could be considered Christian but the political structure was deliberately not.

How Has Religion Influenced American History and American Politics?

Religion has affected our culture significantly and thus our history, but politics, less than we might think.

Alexis de Tocqueville referred to the United States as a tabula rasa. A place where the slate is wiped clean and people start from scratch. Nearly everyone who came to the New World did so in order to flee some form of repression in Europe, be it economic, political, or religious. My own grandfather left Denmark in the 1890's and immigrated to the US. What most people don't realize is that the Scandinavia of that period was still under a feudal agricultural system and an almost theocratic social structure. Even though my grandfather was a penniless, landless, uneducated peasant laborer, he still had to have permission from the church to leave the country. It was in the early part of the 20th century that the Scandinavian governments finally realized that they had lost a fifth of their population to immigration and began the social reforms for which they are known today.

Upon arriving here, the immigrants were let alone to pursue the American dream as best they could. People generally did not like their government in the old country, so as population grew and thus contact with the central government became more apparent, they just moved farther away. As a result, a dislike for central government (be it for religious or political reasons) became part of the American psyche over the centuries. Most people who had moved to the hinterlands either lost their religion or practiced it in unique ways because there was no church infrastructure to promote orthodoxy in the remote regions.

Religion in America tends to be decentralized just like its government and its economy and is free to change to meet the needs of people. You see this to a limited degree in Canada, but scarcely at all in Europe or Latin America. Perhaps because of this lack of central control or perhaps the capitalist notion of continuous adaptability to the marketplace, America has periodic religious reawakenings. From the mid-1700's to the present, we have had several. Some historians argue for as many as five and some say only two. But in the opinion of many we are now at the beginning of the Fourth Great Awakening.

Each Great Awakening follows a pattern of general religious revival which then feeds into a political consciousness, and then a challenge to the dominant political culture. Depending on how you date the occurrence of each of these cycles, it also includes a war.

The First Great Awakening

The First Great Awakening cycle is considered to have occurred from 1730-1830.

The early colonists to New England were the Puritans. They set about to establish a City on the Hill that was the New Eden. It was a closed-minded and closed-fisted society that tolerated no deviation from the religion dominated social order. This worked for about two generations following settlement of the original colonies. In the late 17th century, Isaac Newton published Principia Mathematica which described his findings in the fields of mathematics and physical science. Suddenly, the previously accepted religious formulations were under challenge. It was now possible that mankind could actually understand God's blueprint which lessened the gulf between God and mankind. For the Puritan Calvinists, this was catastrophic. Mankind was no longer subject to the inevitability of predestination. Reason gave us hope. Young people began to question the rigidity of their biblical commonwealth that their ancestors had created and there was a decline in piety and an increase in frivolity. Those pesky young people! Some preachers sermonized about how the youth started having co-ed hayrides and as you can imagine there was an increase in the number of children conceived out of wedlock. To the Puritan elders, the social order was crumbling. That is, this younger generation was going to heck (in a handbasket). In stepped Jonathan Edwards, a Congregationalist minister whose sermons such as "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*", became part of the American literary canon. His image of a spider dangling from his web over a hot fire was used to describe the human predicament. Because at any moment, our hold on life could break and we would be plunged into the fires of eternal damnation. All because of those hayrides.

At the same time, a new type of clergymen, called evangelists, began preaching up and down the eastern seaboard. They said that the only way one gains citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven was through conversion. It removed the petty quarrels over ecclesiastical structure that seemed to divide Christians elsewhere and put it solely in the hands and deeds of the individual. These preachers worked their way inland to the generations of unchurched who had moved to the frontier, especially in the mountains and valleys of the south. One effect was the proliferation of dissenting religious groups (Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians) and provided a common view of Christian faith and life as they saw it.

The reaction to the great awakening in the urban areas was that the Old Puritan ideology began to crumble and give way to rationalism. This led to the rise of Unitarianism, a sense of the new American identity, and the notion of self-determination.

The Second Great Awakening occurred from 1820-1900 and was characterized by a rise in evangelism and big tent camp revival meetings and focus on an ethic of benevolence within the churches. It also included the rise of transcendentalism within the Unitarian Church. 2GA started with a belief that the American Revolution had some unfinished business. Slavery still existed and the right to vote was still limited to white, male landowners. There were reform movements for abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, and against political corruption. The leaders of these movements tended to also be religious leaders. Those in favor of abolition and women's suffrage were regarded as radicals. Those in favor of temperance were considered conservative.

Andrew Jackson was the first president in this period and he was the first president who was not of the revolutionary war era and was also the first who was not from the original colonies. Most of the political discourse from 1820-1860 was an effort to forestall the inevitable civil war over slavery and the nature of the union. Ultimately, the disruption that the civil war caused led to massive migration west, the annihilation of the Indian populations, and a rise in industrialization. Immigration was increased to feed the industrial machine and with the settlement of the west nearly complete, many stayed in urban areas to work in the sweatshops and factories. The second great awakening ended with the beginning of the union movements and a focus on the equality of man. Some issues that were long in maturing began to be implemented. Among these were women's suffrage and prohibition.

The Third Great Awakening occurred from about 1890-1970 and was characterized by a shift from failures in personal responsibility to societal failures and a more secular interpretation of the Bible. Big business was controlled, labor unions flourished, civil rights and women's rights arose, and education became universal. Many prominent religious leaders were the leading advocates of social change. Government was regarded as a means of rectifying society's failures. Mainstream Christianity took on new forms including liberation theology. In the 60's, ministers wore turtlenecks, played guitar in church, and hosted coffee houses in the church basements. This period is deemed to have

ended in the 70's with disenchantment in many of these liberal reforms. I blame it on disco music.

Teddy Roosevelt could be considered the first president of the 3rd Great Awakening as he took on the big business trusts and began to recognize the rights of those less fortunate. Labor union activists were mobilizing workers, and academicians were looking at new ways of educating these masses of people. The Great Depression had shown that government needed to play a role in leveling the playing field for everyone. WWII moved the US from a largely agrarian isolationist country to a mammoth industrial superpower. The GI Bill performed the single most important act of social mobility in the history of the world by providing a college education to millions of young men who would never have had a prayer of going to college prior to the war. The New Deal under FDR and the Great Society under LBJ were investing heavily in the infrastructure and people of the nation in the ambitious hope of eliminating poverty and inequality forever. However, as the government was doing this, some people also began to feel that maybe this was being taken a little too far. Most people had no problem with the government passing the Civil Rights Bill to ensure racial equality, because it was the righteous thing to do and did not affect their lifestyle personally. But when the courts ordered school busing to promote integration, many of the ethnic and religious groups that had been strong supporters of the New Deal and the Great Society began to think government was becoming too intrusive. Others felt the same about abortion rights and the ERA.

The Fourth Great Awakening considered by some historians to have begun in the 1960's. It is characterized by the return to sensuous religion, an interactive relationship with Christ, a reassertion of the concept of personal sin, a stress on the ethic of individual responsibility and dedication to family. This particular Great Awakening is the subject of a book by Robert Fogel, a Nobel-prize winning economist from the University of Chicago. He asserts that this period will be characterized by a rise in spiritual capital.

He says, the spiritually estranged are not doing well. These are the materialistically rich, the chronically poor, the alienated young, the defeated mid-lifers, and the estranged elderly. That accounts for just about everyone at some point in their lives as far as I can tell.

To deal with this estrangement, America needs an infusion of spiritual values into our social order as a way of moving us forward. He does not say specifically how that infusion occurs but he does admit that the religious right has masterfully taken control of that issue and is orchestrating major political changes based on what they consider to be right.

The author also says that one of the key components of the Third Great Awakening was education and that, through ridding the world of ignorance, we had hoped to eliminate prejudice, poverty, and injustice. But he reminds us that the greatest human catastrophes of the 20th century were led by educated people: the Jewish holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda, the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture. He feels that education without a spiritual component does not lead a people out of darkness.

To this I reply, that religious zealots throughout history have been both well-educated and fired by spiritual values. Some of these are people who commit terrorist acts, assassinate political leaders, and murder doctors at abortion clinics.

What is missing in this mix is a large dose of reason.

I am always amazed at how these agents of change focus on a few gut-level social issues as the cause of all our problems, such as abortion rights, the upsurge in divorce, out of wedlock births, gay rights, etc.

Historian Francis Fukuyama in his book, The Great Disruption, notes that sociologists have determined that there is no statistical difference between the number of children conceived out of wedlock in previous centuries compared to current times. The only difference is that in the old days, there was something called a shotgun wedding, today it rarely occurs.

In fact, in the old days, blended families were much more common than now. Then, it was nature's fault because life was generally nasty, brutish, dangerous, and short. Husbands died from disease and injury. Wives died from disease and in childbirth. Most children did not live to maturity. If you look in your own family tree you will see many blended families as remarriage was usually necessary for survival in frontier times.

I do not agree that there are indeed serious societal problems that must be solved. We are just studied more than we have ever been. As far as I can tell, society is in pretty good shape. For the most part, there is more material, spiritual, and intellectual wealth across our nation than ever before, we are better educated than ever, better fed, with more choices and opportunities than any previous generation. I think this generation of young people is the luckiest to have ever lived, despite the tattoos and body-piercing. All they may lack is the good sense to use it properly, but that makes them no different than any other new generation.

It is our job as parents and caregivers to give our children the spiritual and intellectual capital to make good choices. We have no concept of what the world will look like in fifty years, all we can do is give them the resilience to effectively adapt to change. The only thing we can count on IS change. Look at these examples from our own experience:

Senator Carl Hayden of Arizona once said that he had the good fortune to sit around the campfire as a young man swapping stories with Geronimo and then to live long enough to see a man walk on the moon.

My dad used to drive cattle to market on horseback in his youth, and ended his work career building 747's for Boeing.

When I went to college, I used slide rules to solve math problems and computers were blue and printed paychecks. Twenty years ago cell phones barely existed. Ten years ago, no one heard of the internet. Now we access the internet through our cell phones.

We also need to remember that politics is extremely superficial. For as much as it inflames our passions, it is important to note that, outside of a state of war, most politicians do not have a significant impact on society. Besides, politics is mostly perception.

TALE OF KENNEDY, REAGAN vs JOHNSON, NIXON
AFRIKANER – discussing Clinton and Bush

The whole premise of the Fourth Great Awakening is part truth, part conjecture, and part humbug. Religion has never played a significant role in the social changes wrought by each of the great awakenings. It acts as more as a follower and support mechanism. Politics plays only a superficial role, rousing passions more than influencing history. If the 4GA is indeed just beginning as historians suggest, we have virtually no way of knowing which direction it will take and even its impetus. No matter what we do, the colliding forces, of science, technology, globalization, and the media are what will irreversibly move it along its evolutionary path, not religion or politics.

The unfortunate part of this scenario is that all previous awakenings culminated in great wars. Do we have the capability to forestall one before our zealotry overtakes us or will the current one last for the 100 years of the cycle?

None of this means that we should abdicate our responsibility to try to influence change. Many special interest groups are trying to manipulate politics for their own ends, we need to be vigilant in ensuring that no one viewpoint dominates the discourse. Those who espouse a good dose of religion as the solution to all our social problems, remind of that old adage: if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.

Go now in peace.