

**Putting Our House (And Senate) In Order**  
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Good morning. When we sat down a few months ago to plan the services for this fall, I suggested that this Sunday, the one right before election day, should have a political theme. Now, when I suggested that, I had no idea what politics and religion had in common, other than that they can both wreck a good dinner party.

To help me find a connection, I went to two old friends -- one who's a minister and one who's a politician. [No, I didn't really do this, but Web Kitchell never really talked to Coyote either.] I'll be the first to admit that I don't know much about religion or politics. But I am pretty good at analogies. So, I thought I'd use this hidden talent to find a connection.

I put each one in a separate room and I would ask one a question, then run to the other room and ask the other the same question. This was how I would find my common link between religion and politics. I asked: If religion were a flower what would it be? The minister answered a crocus, because it's the first bright ray of Spring that pops through the darkness of winter. The politician had trouble deciding on any one flower -- I think he didn't want to offend me. So he said: "Well, some would say a rose, because it's beautiful to look at but dangerous if you get too close. Others might say a lily, because it looks like the horn that we all like to toot so much. And I know some, though I'm not necessarily among them, who would say a venus flytrap -- for obvious reasons. What do you think, son?"

I didn't bother answering ... it obviously wasn't a crocus, so I wasn't interested. I moved on to other topics -- food (a piece of bread; a sausage); drink (water; champagne) and many others to no avail. Finally ... I was exhausted ... I just flopped down in a chair and muttered something like "I feel like a vegetable." The politician said "an onion." What? He said, "If politics were a vegetable, it would be an onion." Great. My brain was mush and this guy was still playing my analogy game. So, why not. I went over to the minister. OK Reverend, if religion were a vegetable, what would it be? No hesitation: "An onion," he said.

I was dumbfounded. I had found my common link. "All right, Reverend, why is religion like an onion."

"An onion, like religion, is beautiful when it's whole. Some people, though, think that you can peel away pieces of the religion -- throw out the things that you don't like -- and still retain its essence. They're wrong, religion is like the onion, if you start peeling away layers, pretty soon you're left with nothing."

This was pretty heady stuff. And, no, he wasn't a UU minister, but no matter.

So I went back to the politician, "Why is politics like an onion."

"Well, son, an onion like politics is beautiful on the outside, when it's whole."

I was feeling goosebumps.

"But once you look inside, you get real irritated and eventually you start to cry."

I gave up after that. These two obviously couldn't help me find a common link between politics and religion.

It occurred to me that maybe I was asking the wrong question. It wasn't a common link that I needed; it was more a question of how politics and religion should interact. It doesn't matter if they have all that much in common. They are both a fundamental part of our lives and our culture. How should they fit together?

The major problem with our political process today is that it has lost sight of the proper role of government. We need to put our House ... and Senate and executive branch ... in order again. We need to more clearly define the proper role of the government, as well as the proper role of religion and our other major institutions.

Right now, we're terribly mixed up. Politicians are under increased pressure to legislate morality and ethics. Have safe sex. Don't have sex. Don't be homosexual. Be homosexual, but not in my school. Don't watch this movie. Don't read this book. Don't get an abortion. Get an abortion if you want one, but make sure you tell your husband, your parents, or whoever. I could go on and on.

Let me give you one brief, terrifying example. On Tuesday, residents of Oregon will vote on Ballot Measure 9. I won't try to characterize it; let me just read an excerpt to you: "State, regional and local governments and their departments, agencies and other entities, including specifically the state Department of Higher Education and the public schools, shall assist in setting a standard for Oregon's youth that recognizes homosexuality as abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse and that this behavior is to be discouraged and avoided."

In some ways, I guess I wish I lived in Oregon. I would love to live in a place where the government has no problems. Just think ... to live in a place where the educational system is so perfect that the only important issue is the sexual orientation of students.

At the same time that politicians are willing to make private moral decisions for us, they are afraid to make important public decisions that are necessary. Government is needed to keep us from hurting each other. Government must give industry an incentive to control pollution, otherwise the profit motive would result in dirty air and water. Government must help business make choices that are best for society -- such as providing a safe workplace. Otherwise, society will bear the costs of the disabled and abused. Government must protect Americans at home --

with police and fire protection; with emergency management; with safe bridges, clean drinking water, and affordable medical care. Government must protect us from threats from abroad, whether the threat is to our territory, our people, or our economy.

So, my first political bumper sticker: Get government out of the bedroom and into the boardroom. Personal decisions about relationships, lifestyles, and so on should be left to the individual, her conscience, and her church. Decisions that will affect society as a whole -- a clean environment, safe factories and streets, affordable housing and medical care, and so on -- should be made by government.

I can't stand here, though, and just point the finger at elected officials. Sure, they must bear a good part of the blame for government's failure to address the critical problems that we face. But we must share the blame with them. From the interest groups to the news media to our own appetite for gossip, we too have lost focus. I don't care who Bill Clinton slept with, who Gary Hart went boating with, or whether George Bush had a secretary who took more than dictation. These are matters of personal morality, which should be important only to the individuals and families involved.

We have to stop measuring a politician's morality by his personal behavior. Whether a public servant is acting morally should be determined by the public actions which she takes. Let's start asking the real moral questions: How have you treated the homeless? What have you done to help those with AIDS? Where were you when millions of poor children came to you for help? Why did you vote for guns and war and death instead of food and housing and medical care? These are the moral issues I want to see politicians address -- not the strength of his libido or her lack of personal self-control.

So, my second bumper sticker: Stop looking in politicians' beds and start looking in their heads. Stop confusing government service with the priesthood. We don't need our leaders to be celibate or monogamous or heterosexual. We need them to care about real people and real problems. What have they done with their power and influence; how have they helped those who need help; what will they do to make a difference in our lives. A moral politician is one who uses her power wisely to help those in need.

Where does religion fit in? Religion must provide the over-riding framework for government action. Our religions tell us what is right and wrong -- not only personally, but also for society. We must help the poor, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and feed the hungry. Whether we study the writings of Moses, the Apostles, Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius, the message is clear: we have an obligation to help those who need help.

I don't share President Bush's belief that this should be done through 1000 points of light. This should be done by our government. We've tried volunteerism and it just doesn't work. Habitat for Humanity can build hundreds of houses a year, but it can't build the millions of homes, group homes, or hospitals that we need for the nation's homeless. Soup kitchens provide

food for thousands of people every day. But they can't provide the jobs that are needed to enable the millions of unemployed to buy their own food. Urban churches run programs for run-away children, but they can't provide the educational programs that are needed to keep these kids in school.

Government has strayed from the goal of helping to ensure those inalienable rights that were so eloquently stated two centuries ago: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life is threatened when there's no food on the table. Liberty is meaningless when it's the freedom to live in an abandoned car with no job, no education, and no hope for the future. And you can't be happy if you're 16 and out on the streets because your schools couldn't afford to provide you with a suitable education.

So my third bumper sticker: Inalienable rights, not points of light. Let's put government back in the business of helping us to achieve our grandest visions of the future -- a good education for our children, a job, a house, food on the table, a doctor when we're sick, a helping hand when we fall, and a retirement that's free from fear.

Well, back to reality. Election day is Tuesday. What are we going to do now? First, vote. Vote for people who you think have the moral fiber to make the tough decisions, to make government responsible for our problems again, to make government responsive to the real needs of society instead of to the panderings of special interest groups. Vote for the people who you think will make a difference.

And then start thinking about the future. Start worrying about the local elections in 1993, the state elections in 1994, and even the next presidential election in 1996.

I was in Washington a few weeks ago. They've got this terrific store that's nothing but campaign buttons. I was looking through all the old buttons and some interesting ones from this year, too. And then I saw the Quayle '96 button. And the Buchanan '96 button. And even the Phil Gramm in '96 button. So, no, it's not too early to start thinking about 1996.

As we approach the end of the 20th Century, we need to rekindle the vision for this country that our founders had at the end of the 18th century. Let me take a minute to recite some of Thomas Jefferson's words to you:

"Let us, then, with courage and confidence pursue our own Federal and Republican principles, our attachment to union and representative government. Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of the others; possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation; entertaining a due sense of our equal right to the use of our own faculties; to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from our fellow-citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our

actions and their sense of them; enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter -- with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? Still one thing more, fellow citizens -- a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government."

We won't be able to put our House, or Senate, in order overnight. But if we take an interest in the real issues of government, if we make our government officials know what's important to us, if we let our common religious beliefs set our national priorities, we can begin to make our government one of compassion, justice, and mercy again. Amen.