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An ethical base for politics must come from all of us

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 6, 2010 A small c catholic

For several weeks now I have been marinating in the speech Pope Benedict XVI gave to a Westminster Hall full of British politicians [1] on his recent journey to the United Kingdom.

What has especially engaged me is what he described as ?the central question at issue,? which is, ?Where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found??

The pontiff?s answer to this question is, at base, ?religion,? though he naturally argued for the Catholic understanding of that. The role of religion, he said, is ?to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.?

These words give me both hope and pause. First, the cause for pause.

When religious figures use the words ?objective? or ?absolute,? my journalistic skepticism starts raising red flags. I know from experience that the old standard of being ?objective? in reporting the news is simply unattainable. One can hope to be fair in such reporting, but pure objectivity is an illusion, given that each of us brings to the task our own background, worldview, and sense of what is fair.

We need merely to look at how the Vatican has used the word ?objective? in the past. For instance, it has called ?the inclination? toward homosexuality ?an objective disorder.? [2] Not only does this slander a significant percentage of Catholic priests but it represents the kind of ancient hermeneutics that once caused the church -- to its later embarrassment -- to condemn Copernican science.

Still, I?m uncomfortable with what is called ?moral relativism? or ?situational ethics? because of my belief that even if it?s impossible for humans to know truth fully, some things are true and some aren?t, some good and some evil, some right and some wrong.

This simplistic binary value system often leads us into terrible trouble and yet it points us to a reality beyond ourselves, a reality we name God.

The pope, I think, is right to insist that if we lose this source of ethical values, we finally lose our ability to navigate life. We are rudderless, adrift in a relativistic quagmire that ultimately has us pledging allegiance to the religion of Whateverism.

Author and political scientist Glenn Tinder makes a similar point in his book *The Political Meaning of Christianity [3]*. He says our faith promotes the idea that each individual is of ultimate worth and dignity because he or she has been created by God and destined by God for an eternal relationship with the divine. This idea of the exalted individual, Tinder writes, is the ?spiritual center of Western politics.? It?s why we have a welfare system. It?s why we send out the Coast Guard to rescue a single hapless sailor adrift at sea.

Lose that, he says, and, well, to quote myself, ?We are rudderless, adrift ??

The question, of course, becomes how we can use religion (whether Catholic, Protestant or something else) as what Benedict called an ?ethical foundation for political choices.?

My inner Martin Luther wants to argue that in the end this must be a bottom-up process. Yes, we need religious teachers and leaders. We need a reliable sacred text. We need tradition. But if we are to undergird public policy with solid ethics, the arguments must come not just from the pulpits but from the pews. That is, people who are committed to living out their faith -- as disciples of Jesus Christ in the case of Christians -- must be the ones who infuse the political system with ethical questions and ethical boundaries.

Only in that way will the ethical base be broad enough to support a system required to respect the dignity of each human being. The task of the pope and other religious leaders is not to dictate those ethical boundaries but to encourage us to find them, as Benedict did in Britain.

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