

CONSCIENCE AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

DURING 1998—ever to be remembered as the year of the Clinton sex-and-lies scandal—not once did my wife and I hear a reference to Mr. Clinton’s troubles from the pulpit of our Catholic Church in Olney, Maryland. Our experience in this suburban Catholic parish less than an hour’s drive from the nation’s capital provided an interesting prism through which to view the relation of religion to politics in America. The attitudes toward politics and religion among the priests and the people at St. Peter’s seemed different from, and perhaps healthier than, the views now so prevalent in the national debate. BY PATRICK GLYNN

**HEEDING
THE STILL,
SMALL
VOICE**

Of course, many ministers and priests across the country, even some Catholic ones, delivered sermons on the Clinton matter. At one point, Cardinal O'Connor of New York uttered critical words on the president's conduct from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Washington's Cardinal Hickey was more oblique. In one of his monthly letters to his flock, he pictured "sin" as having "hired an unscrupulous public relations firm to improve its image," employing clever public spokesmen and "the wizardry of modern technology" to "glorify lying, cheating, stealing, marital infidelity, and even murder."

Nonetheless, for the most part, the Washington archdiocese, and certainly our parish, seemed to cleave to an age-old Catholic tradition in America. Except on very few political issues with clear-cut moral and doctrinal relevance—today abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty are foremost among them—the Catholic clergy, especially the rank-and-file, parish-based clergy, tends to maintain silence, leaving political decisions to the private consciences of parishioners.

Quietness of Heart

Did I regret our priests' reticence on this issue of national moment? In the end, no. At first I wondered about it. The Clinton matter, after all, raised not just political but significant moral concerns. But as I looked out on our suburban, middle-class congregation—brimming with young children—I could not imagine how our priests could raise the Lewinsky issue from the pulpit without making parents squirm in their pews. Moreover, comment on the scandal would have divided parishioners along political lines (this was, after all, predominantly Democratic Montgomery County, where political feelings on all sides tend to run strong).

Perhaps more to the point, for somebody who had spent entirely too many hours in 1998 watching talking heads on MSNBC and feeling outrage at the president and his defenders, the reprieve from "all Lewinsky, all the time" came as something of a relief.

Patrick Glynn, associate director of the George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, is the author of God: The Evidence.

Not only was the regular Sunday reprieve from the Clinton controversy welcome; it was also, I began to sense, necessary, as a prerequisite for spiritual health. Worship demands quietness of heart. "Be still, and know that I am God," says the Psalm. Much of the Catholic Mass is aimed at helping the soul to disengage from worldly cares, emotions, and sins in preparation for reception of the Eucharist, the body of Christ. Toward the end of this preparation, the congregation engages in the "sign of peace," in which the priest prays for the peace of Christ and worshippers offer a sign of peace, usually a handshake, to one another. It is this peace of Christ that we are exhorted to accept into our hearts during worship and then carry back out into our daily lives. As fallen human beings, all of us know how elusive this peace can be. One certainly does not find it in the political realm.

The Soul in Strife

Politics is not a spiritual activity. Indeed, it is among the least spiritual of activities, because it involves the soul in strife. Not that it is wrong; it is a vocation like any other. Nations need politics and politicians, and my own belief is that our nation is best served by having politicians who are themselves moral, upright, and genuinely religious, in whatever tradition. Moreover, strife, political and otherwise, is an unavoidable feature of earthly life. But the beginning of wisdom on the question of religion and politics—as St. Augustine knew—is the recognition that the two activities are antithetical in nature. Politics, based on self-love, engages and usually inflates the ego; religion, based on love of God, demands that we overcome it.

Jesus seemed unimpressed by the political sphere, almost contemptuous of it. When others attempted to draw him into the major political conflicts of his day, he resisted. Asked whether Jews should pay taxes to the Roman Empire—certainly a "hot-button" issue—he requested a coin and then inquired whose image was on it. Caesar's, came the reply. "Render therefore unto Caesar what is Caesar's," he said, "and to God what is God's." St. Paul's political advice to the early Church was essentially the same: it consisted largely in exhorting Christians to be law-abiding citizens and to

respect temporal rulers as having been put in place by God. There was a great concern—first on the part of Jesus, later his apostle Paul—to prevent Christianity from becoming a merely political movement.

A too direct coupling of religion and politics in the public square is usually pernicious, not only for politics, but also for religion itself. The result is typically not the sanctification of politics, but politicization of religion. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church left behind long years of persecution but also lost some of its original innocence in its new collaboration with the state. Indeed, the great scandals of Christian history have always been political scandals, stemming from the Church's use and abuse of temporal power.

Does God Take Sides?

Closer to home, no one could fail to notice how little help religion and religious language provided in sorting out the Clinton mess. At first, the matter of Clinton's lies and misdeeds seemed tailor-made for the religious right, who jumped all over the issue. But soon Carole Shields of People for the American Way took to the airwaves announcing that she was the daughter of a Baptist preacher and urging the nation to ignore the president's misconduct and "move on." Once the Right had draped its political views in the mantle of Christianity, the Left was impelled to do the same.

The day before the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives, the president's own rather visible Methodist minister, J. Philip Wogaman, was on radio and television reminding us that Jesus preached "forgiveness." The political relevance of this lofty observation was hard to discern. Yes, Jesus loves the driver who speeds 20 miles over the limit, and ultimately, one hopes, forgives him, even if He would prefer that the driver would behave himself. But does Jesus mean for us to let the speeder out of the traffic fines? Jesus, we are taught, can forgive murderers and child-molesters, and exhorts us too to forgive such people. But that does not relieve society of the necessity, or the duty, to define such acts as crimes and punish them accordingly.

The longer the debate went on, the more it seemed to me that the Clinton

issue was best viewed through the purely secular lens of politics, law, and constitutionality. In this I am sure I am not alone. By the end of the president's virtuoso performance at September's National Prayer Breakfast—in which he concluded a lengthy and lugubrious confession of various “sins” with an angry pledge that his lawyers would fight the charges to the end—I am sure there were many Christian conservatives who were ready to rebuild the much-maligned “wall of separation” between church and state brick by brick.

Both sides in the House impeachment debate prominently invoked the name of God. Did God take sides in this great controversy? It would be presumptuous to assume so. God is not a sociologist, much less a pundit. We think in terms of collectivities and opinion polls. We, especially those of us involved in politics or public policy, attach great importance to the goings-on in the White House or on Capitol Hill. God—the Bible is very clear on this—does not see the world quite the way we do. Where we see collectivities and poll numbers, God sees individual hearts, their inmost thoughts and intentions. What we judge to be of great importance from our perspective in the earthly city—an impeachment debate, for example—may not have quite the same importance from the standpoint of the city of God.

We focus on collectivities, while God works one soul at a time. In this way He manages to bring about large results by means that are often invisible to us. A Roman pundit, circa 30 AD, would have certainly regarded the execution of a certain charismatic religious leader in Jerusalem as a politically marginal occurrence, a virtual non-event. He would have had no idea that within 300 years, this event and its aftermath would transform the Roman Empire beyond recognition.

The Individual Conscience

Religion does its real work in politics not by arousing moral indignation, but by awakening the individual conscience. The distinction is a subtle but important one. Moral indignation drives us to condemn others; conscience prompts us to question ourselves. The great leaps of progress

in Western politics have come from an awakening of conscience. Indeed, viewed in the perspective of two millennia, the story of Western politics has been a tale of the progressive awakening of conscience, the application of an ever more exacting, humane, and—dare we say it?—Christian moral standard to political life.

As Augustine observed, the “earthly city” and the “city of God,” politics and religion, are separate and exist in opposition to each other. But the vision of the city of God has functioned as a kind of standing critique of the earthly city. And gradually, through the stepwise work of reason, the Western conscience has sought to bring life in the earthly city more in line with values of the heavenly city, and continues to do so.

In large measure, the society we have attempted to fashion in modern liberal democracies—a society, for example, that debates the impeachment of a leader based on offenses growing out of a sexual harassment lawsuit—is underpinned by values first set forth definitively in the New Testament. The notion of the God-given equal dignity and freedom of every individual human being—regardless of class, gender, race, or ethnic group—first appeared full-blown in the earliest Christian communities, some of which were not only unprecedentedly egalitarian but also unprecedentedly multiethnic in character. Amid the rigid social hierarchical and exclusionary religious and cultural taboos of the ancient world, Christianity offered a gentler, more radically egalitarian, and more multiethnic or colorblind view of the human being. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female,” wrote Paul to the Galatians, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In the long run, Western history has been the tale of the gradual incorporation of this vision into politics—not by violent revolution but by a slow process of inward transformation.

The evolution of the Christian attitude to slavery illustrates the point. Augustine, like Paul, believed slavery to be a purely political matter and therefore of no concern for Christians. But Augustine was clearly embarrassed that some Christians held slaves and sought to

defend their practice on grounds that Christian slave holders treated slaves more humanely, more like family.

Later, when conditions changed, and slavery no longer played a functional or in any sense necessary role in increasingly industrial economies, the Christian world's “bad conscience” about slavery translated into action. The 19th-century antislavery movement (like, to a somewhat lesser extent, the 20th-century civil rights movement) was religiously inspired, but worked largely by appealing to the conscience of society, a conscience shaped by the vision of the city of God. Not that anger and indignation were absent from the debates over slavery and segregation: in America the division over slavery led to war. But leaders such as William Wilberforce, who spearheaded the peaceful British antislavery campaign, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who shepherded the nonviolent civil rights movement, self-consciously appealed to the consciences of their fellow citizens. Progress ultimately came less from external political conflict than from inward moral transformation, from human beings finally admitting to themselves that slavery and, later, racial discrimination were wrong. The gulf between social practice and Christian principle was finally understood to be intolerable.

America's Moral Advance

We have in recent years taken this vision of a free, equal, and tolerant society to new heights. Those who complain of pervasive moral decline in American society over the past generation often overlook an astonishing moral advance. We have gone farther than the human race has ever gone toward fashioning a society that guarantees, in practice as well as principle, the equal dignity of individuals regardless of race, class, creed, gender, or ethnic origin. There are still imperfections, still racisms, still tensions. But in all it is a remarkable transformation. I grew up in Chicago, once designated the most racially segregated city in the nation. Today I live in a multiracial, multiethnic middle-class neighborhood in Silver Spring, Maryland, where people of all colors and backgrounds are on mostly easy terms.

Human beings rarely get things quite right, and it is arguable that Americans have pushed the notion of tolerance too far. The public's response to the Clinton crisis is widely taken, by conservatives at least, as evidence of this fact. But the public's response to the Clinton matter is hopelessly entangled with other political feelings and ideas. And political assessments, as I have tried to suggest, often provide a terribly superficial guide to what is really taking place in society's soul. The signs are plenty that the tendency toward indiscriminate relativism and "nonjudgmentalism"—so ably documented by Alan Wolfe—is already self-correcting. For nearly a decade, Western thinkers, ranging from Michael Sandel and Amitai Etzioni to the Pope, have been advancing a critique of "unbounded autonomy" or the "unencumbered self." More significantly, a rediscovery of religion and ethics is taking place at the individual level. To some degree, social statistics reflect this trend: Etzioni called attention some years ago to the "curl back" in the various leading social indicators—crime, teen pregnancy, and so forth, all of which continue their dramatic decline. But the most impressive reports come from the field, from religious leaders who see changes in individual lives. Campus Crusade founder Bill Bright, for example, is convinced that a revival is under way, as is evangelist Steven Arterburn. Religion is reentering American life, not so much via the public square as through the back door, via the individual conscience. Individuals are rediscovering religion experientially, almost pragmatically, as the best solution to the real quandaries posed by modern life. I can see these forces at work at St. Peter's in Olney—which boasts a huge, enthusiastic congregation, a vibrant youth group, and a degree of spirituality, on the part of both priests and lay people, that was rare in the Catholicism of my youth. That's where the real action is, and that is what will shape the America of the future. I have little doubt my fellow parishioners were capable of drawing the right moral lesson from the Clinton scandal for themselves and their children, without a sermon or an official statement from the Church. ■

WWJD?

BY STACI SIMMONS

"WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?" may be the trendiest slogan among Christian youth in America. Its acronym, "WWJD?," adorns jewelry, clothing, coffee mugs, key chains, and school supplies, even a CD under the contemporary Christian music label of EMI. The original manufacturer of the inexpensive nylon bracelets that kicked off the pop-culture fashion has sold over 17 million of the bracelets alone.

This marketing boom began in 1997. Yet the WWJD? concept springs from an 1896 novel by Charles Sheldon entitled *In His Steps*, a book that has been translated into 45 languages and has never been out of print. It portrays an ordinary city at the turn of the century in an America replete with inner-city slums, rampant homelessness, and a complex system of social and economic hierarchy.

The respectable citizens in Sheldon's novel attend church each Sunday morning. They also ignore the social ills around them. The comfortable weekly routine of the faithful continues until, at the close of a sermon on following Jesus' example, a homeless man makes his way to the front of the congregation. Standing before the mortified congregants, many of whom had turned down his pleas for a paying job, the man asks what it means to imitate Jesus. He wonders out loud about the connection between the words preached, the hymns sung, and his own experience with those who sit before him. He speaks of the world that might be born if Christians were to live out the words they speak each Sunday morning. But before he can finish, the man collapses and dies.

So shaken are the fictional congregants and their minister that a large group pledges to live a full year asking themselves "what would Jesus do?" in the everyday situations of life. The group agrees to be guided solely by principles rooted in personal interpretations of the example of Jesus and His motivations, carefully studied. The experiment alters the lives of both the participants and their community.

The story picks up a century later. In the late 1980s, a youth minister in Holland, Michigan, commissioned two dozen inexpensive WWJD? wristbands to give to her youth group as a reminder of the challenge. The trinkets became increasingly popular around the city and caught on nationwide in 1997.

In effect, the marketers are enjoying great success through the mass distribution of a question. The popularity of WWJD? paraphernalia may rest precisely on the willingness—perhaps eagerness—of the sellers to leave the question's answer to individual purchasers. Yet Sheldon's message was indisputably both individual and social, entailing both moral transformation and compassion toward the needy.

America is in the midst of a spiritual renewal, as noted by Patrick Glynn and others in these pages. The success of the WWJD? phenomenon signals youth's role in that renewal. Now gauged primarily by its market impact, the extent of the trend's influence will be measured in time by the answers, given both personally and communally, to the renewed interest in Sheldon's ageless question. ■

Staci Simmons is a research assistant in the Brookings Governmental Studies program.