For God and Country: Transcendence and Public Life

By Michael Gottsegen

In an era in which most Americans are rightly cynical about a politics that seems to be dominated by money and narrow self-interest, there is a danger that we shall be cut off entirely from the animating power of the idea that the political life is in its essence a noble, and even a religiously inspired, calling. The visionaries who created this country were inspired by this idea, and so too have been the patriots in every generation who have labored long and hard to create "a more perfect" union. While it may be that such heroes are relatively rare in every age, America still depends upon them, both for their service to the common good and for their being a catalyst on behalf of the triumph of goodness and nobility. It would be a great calamity if these patriots, and the civic ideal they represent, were to disappear from the scene. Lest this happen, we must recall this ideal and we must endeavor to restore it to its former glory. We must also assess whether the American religions have a role to play in this rejuvenation of American political and civic life.

What then was the ideal of citizenship that inspired earlier generations of patriots? According to the civic republican ideal, the ideal citizen was one who possessed "civic virtue," that is, a dedication to the common weal that transcended narrow concern for oneself and one's own. The ideal citizen was understood not as one who negated his own good, but as one who regarded the well being of his city as his own good and who could not imagine himself apart from it. This patriot also cared for his own honor and desired to win immortal fame, but he sought his honor and glory through service to the republic and the common weal. The men who made the American and French revolutions believed in this ideal and believed they were heirs to a tradition of politics that extended back to republican Rome and Periclean Athens. Inspired by the words of Virgil, they sought to institute a novus ordo seclorum, a new ordering of periods, a new beginning which would be a return to the republican beginning that was made in Greece and Rome. In the new republican order that they sought to create, they hoped that a new political ethos would come to prevail, one that valued impartiality and disinterestedness and was based upon a commitment to, and indeed a passion for, the general welfare or the common good. It is obvious that this aspiration was only imperfectly realized and that many of the men who endeavored on its behalf were propertied patriarchs who saw no contradiction between their commitment to the common good and their acceptance of slavery and the continued subordination of women, but this does not invalidate the ideal for which they strove, an ideal which will continue to inspire us so long as its realization remains incomplete.

The common good is an elusive concept, and more elusive still in practice. One does not come to an awareness of, or a concern for, the common good naturally

or automatically. Both human instinct and our socialization for life in a competitive market economy tell us that it is natural to place our own interests and the interests of our family and of our little tribe ahead of the interests of other families and other tribes with whom we are less closely identified. It is natural – in our society, at least – to regard the others as competitors, and as beyond the circle of one's own concern. One may come to terms with them for prudential reasons, or may make common cause with them to establish fair rules of the game in order to regulate the competition for scarce social goods, but this is not really to include them within the circle of one's self-concern.

And yet, we also know from our own experience that the circle of self-concern can be expanded, that the good of others can become almost as important to me as my own good, that their good can even come to be understood by me as an element of my own good. Another way to think about this is in terms of the concept of solidarity. The circle of solidarity can be narrowly drawn, but it can also be wide open and broadly inclusive. The common good, then, is that good which is common to all who are encompassed within the circle of our solidarity. Indeed, the proof of my solidarity with others is that I pursue their good as well as my own.

There are two ways of understanding how the common good is to be produced. One regards the common good as the sum, or common denominator, that emerges when every person pursues his own or her own private good. Deal-making and logrolling are the legislative and political norm according to this conception. The arts of negotiation and the virtues of moderation and of a willingness to compromise are important here, but only as means for maximizing one's advantage. Knowing how to take the other's point of view is also important, but again as a means for maximizing one's gains at the bargaining table.

The alternative understanding of the common good regards it as an end in itself for which citizens strive, rather than as the unintended outcome of a process of self-interested endeavor. From this perspective, the common good is achieved only because there are citizens who love it more than their own private good – just as one might prefer the good of one's beloved to one's own. From this perspective, the common good is the good that citizens seek and not the coincidental outcome of their pursuit of their own private good in the public square. It is the common good in which citizens ideally seek their pleasure. It is a good whose pursuit arises organically from a feeling of organic interconnection, of solidarity and identification with the other members of the polity, and from a principled refusal to exclude anyone from the circle of civic concern. Taking the other's point of view and being willing to compromise are both important as a means, but not as a means to maximize one's own utility so much as a means to discerning the common good which is the good citizen's chief joy and desire.

The definition of the common good is distinct from the question of how love of, or passion for, the common good is to be cultivated. As John Dewey pointed out,

we must vividly conceive a good, and feel a strong desire for its realization in the world, if we are to make it an object of our vigorous endeavor. In our world today, however, the former preconditions are largely lacking. Most of us do not have a clear conception of the common good, nor are we skilled in the political arts of its discernment. Moreover, there are very few of us who are deeply animated by, or passionate about, the discernment and achievement of the common good. Few discern it, fewer care to, and almost none are inspired to make its realization their foremost goal. For most of us, it is off the radar screen except on the rarest of occasions. And the quality of our public life and of our politics is the worse for it.

But are we as individuals the worse for it? Are we diminished as human beings by the lack of a sensibility that instinctively places the public good ahead of our own private good, and by our preference for the marketplace and the tennis court over a long-winded discussions of social security reform, global warming or missile defense? We might ask who is more fully realized as a human being: Is it the person who transcends the narrow circle of his own private affairs or the one who does not? Is it the person who is moved to act on behalf of her neighbors and fellow citizens or the one who is not and endeavors only on her own (or on her family's) behalf? Is it the person who transcends his mortality and finitude by investing himself in a cause that transcends him or the one who does not?

But, of course, the answer given by Judaism, Christianity and Islam is fundamentally the same. Each of these traditions has harsh words for the man or woman who strives only on his or her own behalf or only on behalf of one's family. Each understands the process of human realization as a matter of transcending self-love and each espouses an ethic of compassionate service to the neighbor that serves as the vehicle of this self-overcoming or self-transcendence. For each of the three monotheistic traditions, the neighbor who is the proper object of my concern includes the nearest neighbor and the farthest, the one who is so like me as to be flesh of my flesh and the one who is a stranger to me, a foreigner, an alien. While the religions have all failed (and continue to fail) to varying degrees to practice fully what they preach in this regard, ultimately each espouses an ideal of righteousness before God that holds that the most perfect human being is the one whose circle of concern and active care encompasses the whole of humanity. Thus religion can be a wellspring of zeal for the common weal and for a commitment to the common good that is in its inspiration religious. This is what religion might contribute to our politics, and if it did this it would be a very good thing.

Can the religions in today's America play this role? Have they any chance of having any impact? Obviously, a dogmatic (or rhetorical or theoretical) commitment to the common good or a dogmatic affirmation of the unity of mankind as children of the one God – which all the great monotheistic religions assert – does not automatically translate into a genuine passion for, and active commitment to, the practical endeavor that should follow from these concepts. As Dewey observed, we only act to realize ends if we have a vivid conception of the

end and experience a strong attraction that impels us to make the realization of this end our business. Without this vivid conception of the object and a strong attraction to it, we may pay the object lip service but nothing of serious magnitude should be expected from our efforts on its behalf. The question of whether the religions can play the role of rekindling a deep and vivid and widespread commitment to the common good, and to political life as the means of its realization, comes down, then, to the question of whether within the synagogues, churches and mosques a form of life can be cultivated that will turn pious phrases into deep and powerful and action-animating sentiments. DeToqueville spoke of the New England town meetings as schoolhouses where Americans learned the arts and habits of self-government. For us the question is whether at the dawn of the 21st century the synagogues, churches and mosques can serve as schoolhouses for the cultivation of the love of, and dedication to, the common good.

The challenges in the way of the churches, synagogues and mosques becoming catalysts of a fundamental shift in the tenor of American politics are significant. Contemporary religion largely accepts the status quo and practically accedes to the separation of religion and politics. Lip service may be paid from the pulpit to national and local political issues, but the tone is usually homiletic and the reference to political issues oftentimes serves no purpose beyond letting the congregants know that the rabbi or pastor is well read and on top of the news. Moreover, given the equation that most Americans make between religion and personal morals, when current events are spoken of from the pulpit, it is typically those items that suggest a question of personal morality (such as Clinton's lying and infidelity or Bush's drinking and lying about his DUI conviction) and not general questions of public policy (such as NAFTA) that receive attention.

The focus of most congregations seems to be more inward than outward, and increasingly so, if Robert Wuthnow, the dean of American sociologists of religion, is correct. The social suffering that matters most to the members of the congregation is that of their fellow congregants. The norm that matters most is to provide mutual aid and support to members who are in need. Thus we see the proliferation of self-help and support groups for all manner of social ills, in addition to the more familiar support that congregations provide to the ill and the grieving and to the victims of fire and flood. The free loan societies that exist within many synagogues, the bikkur holim groups, and the chevra kadisha are all examples of the typical way in which religious congregations respond to social needs and social suffering.

This is not to suggest, however, that most congregations show no interest in the fate of those who are not counted among their members or among the members of their brother or sister congregations. Indeed, many congregations do see themselves as having an obligation to the wider human community, and with this in view act to establish, or to staff, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, communal clothes closets and food pantries to meet the needs of those who are down on

their luck. Of course, these programs are typically small and hardly make a dent in the larger problems, even as they make a real difference in the lives of those lucky few who are the recipients of their generosity. Vis-à-vis the larger social and economic issues that make for poverty and homelessness, these programs are in effect agnostic. They are concerned not with attacking the causes, but with compassionately responding to the consequences.

The response to the underlying problems that these soup kitchens and shelters represent is intimate, local, and personal. It is also apolitical. The members of the congregations who are moved by the plight of their neighbors, and who want to do something -- and want to feel as if they are doing something, are given a hands-on opportunity to make a concrete difference in the life of an individual who is in need. At the same time, it needs to be underscored that the minister or rabbi who summons his congregants to create and staff a homeless shelter or a food pantry is not summoning them to engage in political action of a kind that would address the systemic social and economic causes that have produced the misery to which the congregants are ministering. The question for us is whether we can imagine the ministers and rabbis and imams of America calling their congregants not to small-scale social service delivery, but to political engagement on behalf of a wider class of persons than those individuals whom their soup kitchens and shelters are intended to serve.

If you talk to ministers or rabbis about the need to take this political step, they will acknowledge that their own programs are no more than a band-aid. But they will also tell you that while they agree in principle, it is not realistic to expect that their congregants could be enlisted as soldiers in a political campaign. It is not that their congregants are unmoved by social solidarity, but that they do not have the time for such things. They are too busy with their own lives, their careers and their families. A night in the shelter or an occasional Sunday manning the food pantry they might be able to manage, but to imagine they can give any more time or energy is wishful thinking. Besides, their congregants are not interested in politics, but in doing something concrete. They work in the soup kitchen because they want to make a palpable difference.

Both of these sentiments – that congregants do not have enough time and that they want to do something concrete and personally meaningful -- need to be countered from the pulpits if the congregations of America are to become a real basis of national renewal. To consider the second point first. From the pulpit it must be stressed that the desire to do something concrete, to bind up a wound and help a neighbor in dire need, is meritorious. It is an expression of basic human solidarity in a stratified society in which life chances and opportunities are not fairly distributed. At the gut level, it expresses the intuition that this distribution of life chances is unfair and that the human face in abject distress commands us to open our hands and our hearts in response.

Not to act to alleviate the distress that claims us through the face of the other,

and demands our response, is to incur guilt. To open our hand is to alleviate this guilt. This action may even give us a feel-good moment. But though our distress may be momentarily alleviated, we also know that the underlying social and economic realities that afflict so many others who are in the same situation as the one person whom we have chanced to help remain unchanged. We also know that if it can be changed, it can only be changed through political effort. Our rabbis, pastors and priests need to bring home this fact to their congregants.

In emphasizing that the appropriate response to human suffering is often (at least in part) political, it is important to acknowledge that not all suffering is socially produced or socially remediable. But much suffering is entirely man-made. Much suffering is produced as the intended or unintended consequence of human action, a fact that we obfuscate when we speak of suffering as the product of economic or social forces – as if these were forces of nature like volcanoes or floods. When the causes of social suffering are systemic, the response to them must be systemic and the proper lever of systemic change in a democratic society is political action.

It also needs to be pointed out that the tradition's codification of gamilut hasadim (the "ways of the merciful") occurred centuries before political rights were extended to the masses. The "ways of merciful" were also defined centuries before we came to understand that our social and economic systems are neither natural nor eternal, but are the contingent and changeable inventions of human beings. Understanding that the systems that define our social existence are modifiable, and possessing the political right to act in concert with our fellow citizens to modify these systems, our situation is fundamentally different from that of our ancestors whose wherewithal to respond to human tragedy and suffering was extraordinarily limited. For them, sharing their meager bread with the hungry was the apt and, indeed, the only possible way of rendering their compassion practical. We, however, who are blessed with much greater power of action, can render our compassion practical in ways that our ancestors could not have imagined.

Moral logic tells us that we cannot be commanded to do that which is not within our power. But as our power is much greater than our ancestors, so too is our obligation to do all that is within our power. Thus it is incumbent upon us to transform our immediate feelings of compassion into political advocacy on behalf of the common good. Having the power to act and the duty to use our power for good, we are indeed culpable if we fail to use the power that we possess. Homeless shelters and soup kitchens in our churches and synagogues? By all means! But, in good conscience, we cannot stop there.

"Oh the weight of this burden that I have placed upon us! Who has the time or the energy?" We come back to the rabbi who said to us: "You've got to be kidding. You want me to ask my congregants to do even more than they're doing already? They can barely manage to staff the soup kitchen and the shelter as it

is. They’re too busy to make time for that and you want me to ask for more? They’ll think I’ve completely lost touch with reality.”

Our rabbi makes a good point. What then is the answer? It is certainly true that his congregants are too busy with their lives, careers and families. But this source of resistance must be attacked directly. Our religious leaders must have the courage of their convictions and dare to become counter-cultural. They must be willing to call their congregants’ priorities into question. If their congregants are too busy for serious and sustained political engagement on behalf of the common good, if they are too busy getting and spending and trying to build a private (gated) heaven for themselves and their families, if they are too busy with their golf and tennis and vacations -- if they are too busy, in sum, doing what they regard as being really important – then it is the rabbi’s responsibility to critique his congregants’ scale of values, not to accommodate it. From the pulpit, they must put the critical existential question to their congregants: What kind of person do you want to be? What really matters? What do you want to do with your life?

Can sermons that press congregants to reevaluate the contours of how they have chosen to live their lives really make a difference? Can congregants be persuaded to break with the authoritative consensus that places work and family ahead of everything? Only if the effort is made from the pulpit can we find out. The fate of our republic may hang in the balance. If we are not inspired as citizens to act on behalf of the common good, who will do it for us? There is no one else.