The Role of Religion in Public Policy Debate

Gary E. Farley
Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board

What a place to address the topic of the role of religion in public policy debate! This state and this city were founded about 360 years ago because of a failed effort to have just such a debate.

Roger Williams contended for the organic separation of the institutions of government and religion. He argued that the state could only enforce the "second" tablet of the Ten Commandments. With regard to the "first" tablet—the one concerning the relationship between a person and deity—Williams declared that the proper role of government was to create a climate in which each person could exercise his/her conscience responsibly.

His logic ran like this: If a person is to be held accountable eternally for what he believes about God and for how he worships deity, then he must be free to determine his or her beliefs and practices. Consequently, government should not attempt to determine what a person believes about God, even to the point of allowing a person to deny the sovereignty of God over his/her life or to deny the very existence of God.

But the leaders of the Massachusetts colony rejected this position out of hand. Williams had to flee Salem, buy land from the Indians and found the town of Providence (Miller, p. 28-30).

Note: Williams always was a strong Calvinist who held very orthodox beliefs. And, he was never slow to disagree publicly with those he saw as being in error. This is illustrated by his debates with the Quakers in Rhode Island. He refused, however, to call upon the state to silence and/or coerce the Quakers. He even defended their freedom not only to believe differently but also to propagate their beliefs (Miller, p. 240-247).

Subsequently, in the early days of our nation, Thomas Jefferson and others hardened this concept into a doctrine of separation of church and state, which often has been interpreted to mean that churches should limit themselves to things spiritual and the government, to things material.

Among the more recent voices to be raised contending that life cannot be so neatly dichotomized is Stephen L. Carter in his best-seller *The Culture of Disbelief.* Carter—writing from nearby New Haven—argues that religion must be recognized as a full partner in public policy debates.

In my preparation for this address, I have assumed that the invitation from the

Farm Foundation reflects some level of acceptance of Carter's position. So, I want to share some of the primary presuppositions, perspectives and propositions that Christian theology would bring to the table. Preacher-like, I have been able to work from a fourfold alliteration: **V**ision, **V**alues, **V**ocation and **V**irtual community. And, evangelical preacher-like, I will be pressing for conversions.

Vision

A spate of recent business management books have touted the crucial importance of an enterprise's determining its vision or the end-state that it seeks. Perhaps you have noted just inside the entrance to your neighborhood McDonalds a copy of its "mission" statement. The fact that effective businesses, social movements and people have been driven by a vision or sense of mission is not new—just "re-discovered" and affirmed.

Writing 60 years ago, another New Haven sage, H. Richard Niebuhr, contended that the history of U.S. America can best be understood as being driven by the vision of the kingdom of God. In the preface of his theological classic, he sums up this thesis in these words:

> In the early period of American life, when the foundations were laid on which we have all had to build, "kingdom of God" meant "sovereignty of God," in the creative period of awakening and revival it meant "reign of Christ," and only in the most recent period had it come to mean "kingdom on earth." Yet it became equally apparent that these were not simply three divergent ideas, but that they were intimately related to one another, and that the idea of the kingdom of God could not be expressed in terms of one of them alone (Niebuhr, p. xii).

Briefly "unpacking" this summary, let me indicate that the driving vision of the Puritans was that *God* would be recognized *as sovereign*, both societally and personally. This vision lay behind and beneath the structures and practices of colonial life. It also informed the mission of expansion westward across the continent. The successors of the Puritans created hundreds of new communities in the old Western Reserve and beyond, as an expression of this sense of mission. (The contemporary Religious Right is a modern manifestation of this version of the kingdom of God.)

As with most social movements, however, the succeeding generations lacked the commitment to the vision that characterized the first. The forms continued in place, but the content seemed to be greatly diminished. About 1740, the first in a series of revivals of religion swept the colonies. The focus of the kingdom of God shifted toward the *indwelling of Christ* in the hearts of men and women. Christ reigned primarily in the hearts of persons whose lives had been regenerated spiritually. The social expression of this version of the kingdom vision was to be found in a surging effort to create new congregations and to establish orphanages, colleges, mission societies and later hospitals.

In turn, this version of the vision also waxed and waned. Beginning about

1820, a series of prophetic leaders began to come upon the public scene, announcing the appearance of the kingdom of God right here on earth. These millennial movements carried elements of the previous versions. If you are familiar with the Adventist, Latter Day Saint or Jehovah Witness movements, this is very apparent.

Toward the end of the 19th Century, in response to the rapid growth of the cities, this *kingdom-of-God-on-earth* version of the vision came to be expressed in what has been called the Social Gospel Movement. Its basic thrust was to condemn the injustices that were accompanying industrialization and urbanization, while calling for the application of the Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would like for them to do to you"—in the practice of management.

Against this amplification of the *foci* of the kingdom-of-God-in-America vision, let's consider how it has impacted rural public policy in our nation:

1. I have already indicated that the Puritan version supported the concept of Manifest Destiny. It also seems to lie—at least in a structural sense—beneath the Jeffersonian agrarian dream, which informed the settlement of the West. The township model drew upon the New England concept of community life. At the center of the town would be established a village wherein the yeoman farmers and their families might have their spiritual and material needs met.

2. I would suggest that the Homestead Act and the attendant creation of agricultural colleges found some of its popular support grounded in the reign-of-Christ version of the vision. One important argument for teaching young men how to be effective as farmers was the belief that one was to give expression to his commitment to Christ through his vocation. (***Note***: In the 1820s, pioneer missionaries such as Isaac McCoy were training Native Americans in northern Indiana to farm. He was supported both by his mission board and by the federal government.) In a very real, if indirect way, the vocational training afforded by the agricultural college lent support to a sense of "calling." In fact, I suspect that not a few of you in this room elected to attend such a college for just the reason I am expressing.

3. The social gospel version of the kingdom-of-God-in-America vision seems to have informed Teddy Roosevelt, Charles Galpins, Edmund de Brunner, Warren Wilson and scores of others who provided leadership for the Country Life Movement early in this century. They looked out at rural America and found poverty, ignorance, enslaving tenancy, an undeveloped infrastructure, weak schools and churches, and spiritual destitution. Informed by the same values that informed the urban efforts—justice, love and hope—they formulated a rural effort that paralleled the urban Social Gospel Movement efforts. The denominations were among the cooperators in the Cooperative Extension movement that resulted.

It is my sense that in each of these three examples, a vision of an end-state for rural America was driving the effort: peaceful, productive communities every six miles across the land. . .peopled by well-trained, effective agriculturists, along with merchants, professionals and tradesmen. The vision included the idea that intentional, corrective measures could be designed to address the shortcomings and failures, correcting the bad and installing the good.

Let me sum up my line of reasoning to this point. First, vision drives most significant historical movements. Second, the kingdom-of-God vision, in three versions, has been an important player in the history of U.S. America. Third, rural public policy has been undergirded by these three *foci* of the kingdom-of-God vision from the earliest days of the nation. And, of course, all of this has built upon the presupposition that religion can and should be a full partner in public policy debate, provided that it comes to the table with the understanding drawn from Roger Williams and from Stephen Carter: Religion is to be a full partner, not a dominator nor a doormat.

But, as a transition to my other points, let me note that in this discussion of vision I have been preparing the ground for the other points I will address. I also have been preparing for the presentation of my thesis: Rather than to continue developing public policy that puts patches on the old vision for rural America, it is time for the formation of a new vision. I hope that it will contain many elements of the old, be purged of the sins of the old, and be couched in the best understanding we can generate of the diverse current context and of future trends.

Virtues and Values

Robert Bellah and his associates did us a great service about a decade ago when they identified and chronicled the sources of the values that seem to drive the personal and social lives of many Americans. *Habits of the Heart* finds deep commitments to individual freedom and corporate responsibility among us. It also notes how often we can legitimize very bizarre actions by appealing to these values. Further, it illustrates how these values can come into conflict within a person, among persons and within the society (Bellah et al.).

As I have reflected upon these findings, I have not only agreed with them but also been reminded of the greater truth: If one divorces a value from an overarching vision, the stage is set for tragedy.

The story of Adam and Eve as found in Genesis, Chapter 3, identifies the appeal of good values (appreciating beauty, wanting wisdom, seeking good relations with one's mate) as their excuse for disobeying the command of God. Likewise, we read daily of persons who have done terrible things to others, but seem to excuse themselves by citing such values as need, freedom, and the righting of a wrong.

Good values, separated from a true vision, often will result in bad actions. This seems to be a very significant axiom for ethical reflection.

My first observation in this point, then, is that we should draw upon values in processing the rural public policy debate. At the same time, however, we should recognize that our values must be drawn from and subservient to the larger vision.

For example, the current candidates for the presidency appeal to us in terms of cherished values—e.g., the family farm and efficiency in farm enterprises. They also attack one another in terms of violated values. And—although they contradict one another—when we judge them from values alone, they both appear to be correct.

Or, take the presentations of the commodity groups when a farm bill is being prepared. Each does a wonderful job of wrapping their proposals in cherished values. We listen and we agree. Then, the next group does the same—and so do we.

Later, we may reflect upon their presentations and realize that to respond to one supportively will do great harm to the other. Only a larger vision that takes note of the needs, interest and goals of each set of players—and of the whole—can get policymakers out of the morass.

Secondly, values can and should be employed to criticize and refocus the larger vision from time to time. Recall how in H. Richard Niebuhr's recital of the application of the vision of the kingdom of God in America that the focus shifted from sovereignty of God to reign of Christ and then to the kingdom on earth. Times changed and the focus needed to change, too. But each focus distorted in some ways the larger biblical understanding of the kingdom. To my mind, each of the *foci* stressed a particular value: justice, love or hope. Among the Puritans, for example, justice sometimes became unloving. Among the evangelicals, love often neglected justice and hope. And, among the millennialists, there were those who became so "heavenly minded that they were of no earthly good."

Recently in preparing the manuscript for a text on rural ministry, a writing team—drawn from the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist traditions—identified eight rather specific values that were informing the team's vision for rural America. I find their listing to be illustrative of the values the churches would bring to the table in a discussion of rural policy:

1. Agriculture and other natural resource-based economic activities should be sustainable and renewable.

2. Rural persons/families should be able to enjoy the just fruits of their labor.

3. Rural people should be presented the good news of the Gospel and encouraged to respond by ever-praising Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

4. Rural people should be taught about the beliefs and values of the Christian life and encouraged to apply them in their daily lives.

5. Rural people have a special calling to be stewards of the natural resources God has placed in the world.

6. Worshiping/ministering congregations of Christian faith should be available to all rural people.

7. Policies and practices of the American government and economy have often contributed to personal and community disadvantage in rural America and these areas of neglect should be redressed through policies geared toward justice and fairness.

8. The old six-mile boundaries of community, the driving paradigm of the settlement period, is no longer functional. The 30-mile (or county) model seems to be emerging; so, we are called to work diligently to form and model new communities (Jung et al.).

We recognize that Nos. 3 through 6 are uniquely the duty of the churches. Public policy should remain neutral in these areas. In items 1, 2 and 7, the framers of public policy should take the lead, with the churches as voices around the table. And in No. 8, there seems to be a need for close cooperation.

But then there is a history of close cooperation. An example is the old summer institutes that were held on many land-grant college campuses and were designed for the rural clergy. There is the heritage within USDA of an officer assigned to relate to the rural church offices in the various denominations. And there is the more than 40 years of cooperation among the denominations and the National Association of Conservation Districts for the development and distribution of materials related to the celebration of Soil and Water Stewardship Week.

Vocation

Most of us can trace the creation of the position we hold to the 1908 Country Life Conference called by President Teddy Roosevelt. Perhaps it is time—and past—for another such conference. It is my perspective that there is no common vision giving direction to rural public policy. As a consequence, there seems to be a patchwork of policies, which often counteract the effectiveness of other policies or even work at cross-purposes.

Across the years, I have met many persons who initially got into agricultural education, research and/or policy formation as a response to a sense of calling or vocation—a kind of secular ministry. Some have been worn down by the bureaucracy. Some have failed to keep the faith. Others have quit in disgust.

I want to encourage you to re-dream those old dreams. . .to become revolutionaries. . .to network with others to create a forum in which a new dream can be formulated.

Virtual Community

The version of the kingdom of God in America that informed the Country Life Conference in 1908 and the subsequent gearing up of the Cooperative Extension movement did much good. Ultimately, however, the old paradigm of the six-mile rural community that informed the movement proved to be unrepairable. Improvements in transportation and communications as well as the industrialization of agriculture have made most such communities obsolete.

This is not uniquely a rural problem. A little over a century ago, many continental schools—Durkheim, Tonnies, Pareto, Simmel, Marx and Weber—recognized the loss of the old multi-bonded forms of community that had characterized rural Europe. They founded the science of sociology to address man's need for new forms of community life.

Robert Nisbet wrote of man's quest for community as being the primary theme of the 20th Century (Nisbet 1953). Modernity, bureaucracy, industrialization, urbanization, diversity and scale have all been cited as reasons for the loss of community. After a century of failure and attendant chaos, one is tempted to despair of ever achieving community again. And, one can find support for this among many millennialists—religious and secular.

But there are other paradigms surfacing. For some, it is a recognition that the new centers of rural community life tend to be the larger towns, often county seat towns where Wal-Mart and other major retailers, the franchises, and the schools and health care facilities have clustered. Many times the old six-mile communities have lost their power and become more like "neighborhoods" within the larger 30-mile or county-based community, which centers in this larger town.

Many of us mourn the passing of Main Street and its merchants in the small towns and villages. But we cannot stem the tide. We see as our best hope to work at creating a new spirit of community that embraces a much larger and more diverse area.

Working with the churches from this perspective, I have encouraged a church in the center to seek to become a "full-service" church for the whole county. And I have encouraged the village churches to consider majoring less on being a parish church and more on becoming a "boutique" church—one with a "signature" or special ministry that draws from all across the emerging 30-mile community area. The next logical extension of this model is for the several congregations serving this larger area to see themselves as having an ecosystem, a symbiotic relationship.

This kind of paradigm of community life might well serve to inform efforts to reform rural community life. It could be an important element in efforts to develop rural public policy that seeks to be just, loving and hopeful. It is not the old pattern of community, the passing of which so many have lamented. For many, it will seem to be a kind of "virtual" community—a like-real, but unreal expression. But, in time, it can become the real.

If a mission to create new forms of community in rural America becomes a part of new rural policy, there are as many as 200,000 congregations with more than 30 million adherents who are potential allies in the effort. It seems to me that this is a project that is addressable and one upon which we might cooperate.

Conclusion

I began with the presupposition—one appropriate for our setting here in Providence—that religion should be a full partner in discussions of rural public policy. Drawing upon the thesis of H. Richard Niebuhr, I shared the concept that the vision of the kingdom of God has driven much of American history. Then I identified three forms or *foci* that this has taken and suggested how each form has contributed to rural public policy in the past. And, I announced my thesis that current public policy is not driven by a common vision of the future-state of rural society. I also suggested that we need to get on with identifying a shared vision that will drive the formation of public policy in the future.

While the churches likely will need to continue to take the lead in promoting the sovereignty-of-God and reigning-Christ versions of the vision, we certainly could cooperate extensively around the kingdom-of-God-on-earth focus, particularly as expressed by the prophet Isaiah in poetic fashion in his eleventh chapter—a peaceable kingdom, one characterized by justice, love and hope (Hauerwas 1983).

I continued by suggesting that while many would give "lip service" to the concept of a peaceable kingdom and some might give strong allegiance to it, in everyday life we fall short of that ideal by misusing and misunderstanding values. A dynamic interrelation between visions and values must always exist. Otherwise, we will wrap our avarice in values, while neglecting the vision. I also placed on the table eight values that the churches would want to see addressed in public policy debate.

Next, I asked you to recall that your selection of a profession in agriculture probably involved a sense of calling or mission. I asked you to recommit to working through your vocation, to enable the kingdom vision to be more nearly realized. Specifically, I encouraged you to draw upon the vision—and upon the core values of justice, love and hope that it implies—to formulate, critique and implement policy.

Finally, I proposed a very practical task of creating new forms of community across rural America. The location of this task is the emerging 30-mile communities around the Wal-Mart towns. We will need to consider how the core values and the vision can be expressed therein and how public policy can be put in place to create a supportive climate for this task.

If you decide to accept this mission, you will find thousands of churches with millions of members who know of the vision, who subscribe to the values and have ordered them into personal values. It is they who long for the restoration of community. They will listen and respond and work with you in the accomplishment of your vocation.