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God in politics

God's word was invoked several times in the session hall of the House of Representatives this week as legislators debated the Reproductive Health bill. The bill's main proponent, Rep. Edcel Lagman, basically argued that the issue of the common good, which the bill purports to serve, is for the State alone to settle. His interpellators countered that Congress must not ignore the religious sensibilities of its constituents because the Constitution itself states that we are "a nation under God."

Should God's name be invoked in politics? Or, to put the issue in modern philosophical terms, does religious conviction have a place in the public square?

The answer, interestingly, is not adequately supplied by the constitutional provision on the separation of Church and State. The Constitution guarantees the full exercise of religious freedom and provides that the State shall not establish any religion. Nothing in this provision bars the expression of religious belief on matters that are considered political. Indeed, nothing in this provision prohibits the clergy from running for political office.

At one point in the debate, Rep. Lagman recalled how the late John F. Kennedy, who was then campaigning for the US presidency, responded to apprehensions that his Catholic faith might make him vulnerable to the Vatican's views on crucial public issues. Taking his cue from Kennedy, Lagman declared that he too is "a congressman who happens to be a Catholic, but not a Catholic congressman." This formulation makes for a wonderful sound bite, but it does not settle the issue. In fact, many years later, the young and equally eloquent Barack Obama, also gunning for

the presidency, picked up the issue and gave it a spin that reflected the modern yearning for values.

This was what Kennedy said: "I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair. Whatever issue may come before me as president – on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject – I will make my decision ... in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates." This was an astute statement. Kennedy was talking to an audience of Protestant ministers who feared that a Catholic president might bring his faith to bear on his office. He was courting their vote. But, Kennedy was also echoing a view that had long been held by New England thinkers like William James who thought of religion as "what you do with your own solitude."

This was not the milieu that Barack Obama encountered when he made his own bid for the presidency almost fifty years later. America had gone through many political crises. The Watergate scandal during the Nixon years was most emblematic of the depth to which American political morality had sunk. Americans sought a return to basic moral values that many thought had been lost because of the marginalization of religion.

And so when Obama stood before a gathering of religious leaders on June 28, 2006, two years after he had just won a senate seat, he was determined to put in a word on an issue that had been the preserve of conservative Republicans. Having been a professor of constitutional law, he was expected to enunciate a firm secularism to counter the rising tide of religious fundamentalism. What he said instead was unexpected; he began by paying homage to religion. Here lies his genius as a politician.

He said: "[S]ecularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King -- indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history -- were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to

argue for their cause Their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible, and move the nation to embrace a common destiny."

Obama did not stop there however. He added yet another nuance to an already complex and highly contested tapestry. He reiterated the importance of secularism by arguing from democracy. "Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all."

The principle he affirms in luminous language welcomes and even celebrates the articulation of positions inspired by religious belief. But, he also tells his listeners to respect the views of those who belong to other religions, to subject their positions to the arguments of those who may not profess any religion, and to appeal to moral definitions that are universally shared.

Is there room then for the expression of religious convictions inside Congress? The answer clearly is yes, and, in cultures like ours, it is probably unavoidable. It is absurd to expect people to shed off their moral and religious beliefs when they function as citizens, especially when they are talking about justice and rights. But, it behooves those who articulate them in the public square not merely to invoke them as though they were self-evident truths, but to explain and justify them before those who may not see their relevance.

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