



Viewpoints on religion and secularism (part 3) – Obama, Abraham and Isaac

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- How do secularists think about decisions?
- Why do people support or oppose secularism?

STIMULUS

Speech extract part 1

This is an extract from Barack Obama's 2006 keynote speech on faith and politics (delivered at the Call to Renewal's Building a Covenant for a New America conference) on the topic of religion in politics.

This brings me to my second point. 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.

Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do. But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing. And if you doubt that, let me give you an example.

We all know the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is ordered by God to offer up his only son, and without argument, he takes Isaac to the mountaintop, binds him to an altar, and raises his knife, prepared to act as God has commanded.

Of course, in the end God sends down an angel to intercede at the very last minute, and Abraham passes God's test of devotion.

But it's fair to say that if any of us leaving this church saw Abraham on a roof of a building raising his knife, we would, at the very least, call the police and expect the Department of Children and Family Services to take Isaac away from Abraham. We would do so because we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason.

EXERCISES

- Q1.** Summarise the key themes and arguments of the speech extract.
- Q2.** Is this speech advocating secularism?
- Q3.** If yes, then what type? If no, then why not?
- Q4.** “Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values”. Why do you agree or disagree?
- Q5.** “Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality.” Why do you agree or disagree?
- Q6.** What is the significance of the Abraham and Isaac parable in this speech and what does it say about the relationship between religion and politics?
- Q7.** In this speech a story generally interpreted to be about the value of obedience to a god is reinterpreted to illustrate a view that obedience to a god isn't a sufficient justification. What do you think about reinterpreting parables like this?
- Q8.** Why do you think Senator Obama chose this particular parable to make this point?

STIMULUS

Speech extract part 2

Finally, any reconciliation between faith and democratic pluralism requires some sense of proportion.

This goes for both sides.

Even those who claim the Bible's inerrancy make distinctions between scriptural edicts, sensing that some passages – the Ten Commandments, say, or a belief in Christ's divinity – are central to Christian faith, while others are more culturally specific and may be modified to accommodate modern life.

The American people intuitively understand this, which is why the majority of Catholics practise birth control and some of those opposed to gay marriage nevertheless are opposed to a constitutional amendment to ban it. Religious leadership need not accept such wisdom in counselling their flocks, but they should recognize this wisdom in their politics.

But a sense of proportion should also guide those who police the boundaries between church and state. Not every mention of God in public is a breach to the wall of separation – context matters. It is doubtful that children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance feel oppressed or brainwashed as a consequence of muttering the phrase “under God.” I didn't. Having voluntary student prayer groups use school property to meet should not be a threat, any more than its use by the high school Republicans should threaten Democrats. And one can envision certain faith-based programs – targeting ex-offenders or substance abusers – that offer a uniquely powerful way of solving problems.

So we all have some work to do here. But I am hopeful that we can bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate. And I have faith that millions of believing Americans want that to happen. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack. They don't want faith used to belittle or to divide. They're tired of hearing folks deliver more screech than sermon. Because in the end, that's not how they think about faith in their own lives.

Binding of Isaac

The three largest monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity and Islam, often called the Abrahamic religions) believe there was a prophet called Abraham, who was favoured by their god and who revealed his (God's) will to the world. Both Jewish/Christian and Islamic traditions have some version of the parable of "The Binding of Isaac", where Abraham's willingness to kill his son in obedience to his god's wishes demonstrates his (Abraham's) obedience, and is rewarded.

Jewish/Christian tradition: Genesis 22

From Wikipedia:

"At some point in Isaac's youth, Abraham was commanded by God to offer his son up as a sacrifice in the land of Moriah. The patriarch travelled three days until he came to the mount that God told him of. He then commanded the servants to remain while he and Isaac proceeded alone into the mount. Isaac carried the wood upon which he would be sacrificed. Along the way, Isaac asked his father where the animal for the burnt offering was, to which Abraham replied "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering". Just as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, he was interrupted by the angel of the Lord, and he saw behind him a "ram caught in a thicket by his horns", which he sacrificed instead of his son. For his obedience he received another promise of numerous descendants and abundant prosperity."

Islamic tradition: Suras 37 – The Aligners

In most Muslim traditions Abraham is instructed by God to sacrifice his other son Ishmael, though the Quran doesn't name the son and other traditions disagree.

From Wikipedia:

"The general narrative pertaining to Ishmael in Islamic literature describes the sacrifice either as a test or as part of a vow. Some versions tell of the devil trying to stop God's command from being obeyed by visiting Hagar, Ishmael, and Abraham. Every time the devil says Abraham is going to sacrifice Ishmael, each person answers that if God commanded it, they should obey. Eventually, Abraham tells Ishmael about the order and Ishmael is willing to be sacrificed and encourages Abraham to listen to God. Often, Ishmael is portrayed as telling Abraham some combination of instructions to bring his shirt back to Hagar, bind him tightly, sharpen the knife, and place him face down, all so that there will be no wavering in the resolve to obey God.

"As Abraham attempts to slay Ishmael, either the knife is turned over in his hand or copper appears on Ishmael to prevent the death and God tells Abraham that he has fulfilled the command. Unlike in the Bible, there is no mention in the Qur'an of an animal (ram) replacing the boy; rather he is replaced with a 'great sacrifice' (Zibhin azeem)."

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Imagine you are giving a speech on the role of religion in politics. Half of the audience will be part of the Religion is Great Society and half will be members of the Religion is Awful Club. What will your speech be and how will it address the concerns of both groups?
- Try to find three examples of speeches addressing the theme of religion in politics. At least one should be from a secularist perspective and at least two should come from the UK. Compare these speeches to the extract. What are the similarities and differences?
- Find contemporary news coverage of this speech. What were some of the positive and negative responses?
- Find examples of UK opinion polls on the role of religion in politics. Write a short report or news story on your findings.