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## Politics of Responsibility and Responsibility of Politics

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# POLITICS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY OF POLITICS. A PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL ETHICS ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE USA

*Heidi Hadsell, USA*

### **Introduction**

The evident influence of moral values on political decision making, made moral values the big winners in the 2004 American presidential election. Based both on the different styles of the two campaigns, and on the election polls the day of the election, in which many voters indicated that they had voted for George Bush because of his ‘moral values’, values have rapidly become a dominant political theme. Many political pundits are convinced that George Bush won the election at least in part because he openly declared his own religious beliefs and the moral values he connected to them, while Kerry was more hesitant to do so, and when he did, he did so with more subtlety and nuance. Conservative Christians across the country are ready to cash in on the political influence of conservative Christian values, and thus on the power of conservative Christian leaders, and to translate them into political power to help shape public policy.

So prevalent is the theme of moral values in this post election analysis, it tends to eclipse the fact that whether they be self-interested or altruistic, foolish or wise, straight forward or hidden, values have always been at the heart of the political process. Similarly eclipsed is the fact that not just conservative Christians voted their values, but so too did Jews, Muslims, atheists, people of other religions, and more liberal Christians. Once one recognises that everyone votes his or her values in one way or another, one can see that this election among many other things, demonstrates a genuine divide within the Christian community. There is in fact, a struggle about the meaning of Christianity going on inside Christianity. It is a struggle which often finds political liberals and Christian liberals on one side and political conservatives and Christian conservatives on the other. It is a dynamic that can be seen not simply in public life, but inside many Christian denominations, in the United States and around the world.

## 1. Ethics of Conviction against Ethics of Responsibility

A lot can be and had been said about this struggle. Both sides view themselves as authentic carriers and interpreters of the core of Christianity, and both can point to scripture and tradition to legitimate their moral positions. My purpose here is not to explore this question. Rather I intend to explore another division within Christianity, and indeed within many religions, which has already been, and promises to continue to be at least as decisive and important in the formation of American public policy and foreign policy as that between conservative and liberal Christians. This is a division that was also in evidence in this presidential campaign, and which also divided votes. To put it in the words of the 19th century sociologist Max Weber, this is the division between an ethics of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and an ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). Julian Freund described Weber's two ethical types in a helpful summary:

Let us take the famous distinction which Weber made between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility. One who acts according to the former wants the absolute victory of a cause, without concern for the circumstances and the situation or for the consequences. This is the case of one who applies rigorously the receipts of the Sermon on the Mount, who offers the left cheek when struck on the right one, and who, consequently, refuses to resist even that which he considers evil. Inversely, one who acts according to the ethic of responsibility evaluates the available means, takes the situation into account, makes calculations with inevitable human failings, and considers the possible consequences. Thus, he assumes responsibility for the means, the shortcomings, and the foreseeable consequences, baneful or not.<sup>1</sup>

The ethics of conviction is often greatly admired. Groups, nations, peoples, celebrate especially those of their heroes who take a stand according to their moral convictions. Heroes who, acting regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the consequences, are often greatly revered and remembered, as attested to through song, poetry, holidays and the like, perhaps especially when their convictions lead them to pay the ultimate price. In contrast, an ethic of responsibility, with its awareness of and its careful calculation not just of the moral principles at stake, but of the consequences their application may or may not have in the world, is less immediately or easily viewed as admirable. Indeed an ethics of responsibility often fails to ignite the moral imagination, since it often seems too mushy, too shaded with gray, too morally ambiguous.

Those voters who identified moral values as the primary motivation for the way they voted in the presidential elections, are people who are attempting to do the right moral thing, often according to an

ethic of conviction. Who can blame them – we live in an age in which moral certainty is a welcome relief from constant change, fear, conflict and war, and a helpful guide to people who genuinely seek to do the right thing. These voters who follow or advocate for an ethic of conviction do so not spontaneously or accidentally, but because they have learned to do so. They listen to and learn from the articulation of such an ethic of conviction put forth by religious leaders who persuade them that this ethic is the morally correct path to follow. Inevitably, political leaders, who share their moral values, draw upon and appeal to a shared ethic. In doing so the political leaders implicitly or explicitly promise to lead according to this ethic of conviction once they are elected. They promise, in other words, to make political and policy decisions not just on the moral values shared, but also according to an ethics which as described above, gives little thought to consequences or to the complexities of the political world.

## **2. Dangerous, Simplistic, Inadequate**

However admirable such an ethic of conviction may seem, and however psychologically satisfying it may feel, an ethic of conviction – regardless of who articulates it (left or right) and what its content is – is unsuited to the political leadership of nations, particularly the most powerful nation on earth. It is unsuited for political decision making because it is quite literally irresponsible – it does not take the consequences of its acts into consideration, or as part of its calculation.

The nature of contemporary life and politics demonstrates why an ethics of conviction is inappropriate and even dangerous for political leadership. Complexity and plurality characterise societies like the United States. An ethic of conviction, whether it be centered on opposition to abortion, stem cell research, or gay marriage to name several moral issues that generate considerable heat, is simply not adequate to deal with these issues as they are played out in a very complex and plural society.

An ethics of conviction, again however satisfying it may feel to its adherents, is woefully inadequate to a world grown ever more interdependent. In this world leadership such as that held by the United States by virtue of its vast military and economic power, requires the political ability to do something more than simply declare and follow an ethic of conviction, letting the chips fall where they may. Leadership requires the ability to listen, to compromise, to adjust competing interests, to think through and understand the many consequences of possible actions. One cannot assert effective and fair leadership by simple conviction, leading others to pick up the pieces, in areas such as international trade, environmental questions, economic develop-

ment, immigration, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the like. All such issues require multi-lateral cooperation and decision making. The lopsided power held by the United States today makes leadership according to an ethic of responsibility an urgent necessity. This is of course what European allies and others have sought to make the United States understand in recent years.

Perhaps the most disturbing and dangerous, and also one of the most attractive attributes that accompanies an ethic of conviction in public life is the certainty that moral conviction imparts. At a dinner table such conviction may simply be unpleasant company. At a negotiating table it may do lasting and serious damage. If one is simply sure that one is right, one need not think about consequences, complexity or the position of others. Worse yet, one need not question whether or not one's own convictions are morally correct or practically tenable. An ethic of conviction is therefore especially vulnerable to hypocrisy, since the strength of one's convictions leads one towards blindness regarding the possible equivocation of one's own position, while at the same time encouraging one to attribute all error and evil to one's adversaries. This dynamic is all too familiar in the post 9/11 world in which each side demands an ethic of responsibility from its enemy while it itself embodies an irresponsible and dangerous ethic of conviction.

The Christian theological ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr was a careful observer of the political world. His moral and political analysis gave him a healthy respect for the power of hypocrisy in politics. He therefore viewed political ethics as necessarily quite distinct from personal ethics, just as Weber viewed an ethics of conviction as distinct from an ethics of responsibility. Because of the difference between the personal and the political arenas, and because of the propensity of groups to fool themselves as to the nobility of their cause through self-serving hypocrisy, Niebuhr strongly criticised what he viewed as the idealistic attempt to transport personal ethics into the political arena: 'What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behaviour of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations'.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Moral Obligations of Citizens**

It is not surprising but disturbing that a party and a president imbued with the fire and the power of their own ethic of conviction, find and build on the echoes and the energy of such an ethic in the American population. It is disturbing because what the American citizen requires from its political leadership, Republican or Democrat,

left, right, or center, is not the uncritical confirmation of an ethic of conviction applied in the political arena, but rather careful explanation, education, and debate, which encourage citizens to see the fundamental differences between a private ethic of conviction and a public ethic of responsibility; which enable citizens to comprehend and to evaluate an ethic intended for the political arena, adequate both to the political questions internal to the United States, and to its position of leadership in the world. An ethic of responsibility requires not that our politicians confirm and amplify our prejudices and private moral convictions, but that they challenge us to think and act beyond them.

The absence of this kind of challenge to the voters, and the absence of the exercise of this kind of pedagogical role in relation to the voters, on the part of many contemporary American politicians amounts to the abdication of one of the most important roles of responsible political leadership. One result is a relatively passive, self-satisfied, and often ignorant population which allows its leaders to engage the country internally and externally in actions which have grave consequences no one has thought carefully about and for which, when disaster and tragedy is evident, no one takes responsibility.

In this context one helpful role of Christian religious leadership would be, along the lines of Reinhold Niebuhr, the education of Christian individuals and congregations regarding the complexities and ambiguities of morality in the political arena. The effort should be not to confirm certainties nor to scare people away from the public arena, but rather to soberly educate as to the global as well as national responsibilities of the United States, and thus the moral obligation of citizens to engage the issues, to think about the consequences of any position and to demand from political leadership that it do likewise.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Freund, Julien, 'German Sociology in the Time of Max Weber', in: Bottomore, Tom/Nisbet, Robert (eds), *A History of Sociological Analysis*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978, p. 181.
- <sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Moral Man and Immoral Society. A Study in Ethics and Politics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, *passim*.