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Liberation or Betrayal?

—Brent A. Smith

We live in an age and a country that struggles to distinguish partisan politics and social policy from religious values and proclamations. The legal recognition of gay marriage, for instance, is opposed by some for violating God's will and Old Testament decree, and favored by others as a manifestation of the God of love. Public education policy is supported or thwarted because of the absence of school-sponsored prayer. The political poles of "right" and "left" now also describe Christian persuasions. Republicans lay claim to faith-based moral values that Democrats are advised to exploit in order to court the electorate.

Sometimes the blurring of the distinction between the political and the religious has conspicuously yielded idolatry — as, for example, when party platforms are granted the imprimatur of scriptural authority. And sometimes the blurring issues in crypto-idolatry, as we saw last November, when a multi-faith group took out an ad in papers across the country declaring that "God is not a Republican or a Democrat" — yet admonishing people to vote according to their religious and moral values. Such occurrences further tightened a distinctively American Gordian knot.

The recent Iraqi election provides another such example, for it announces an agenda that, I believe, is at once political and religious. The political side of this matter is obvious; the religious dimension is perhaps less patent. Disentangling these two strands of the knot would be impossible, but discerning them here might allow us to identify the nature of the uneasiness that some of us have felt in regard to the Iraqi citizens' recent trip to the polls.

The election stirred the emotions of many people, including U.S. residents. A Michigan community with a large Iraqi population was visited by a local television crew during the elections in the States. One voter with tearful eyes confessed before the camera, "I've never voted before." Some of us wept with him. I recalled a similar expression of joy from a man who had waited hours in line to vote for the first time in South Africa just a

few years ago. He said that for the first time in his life he felt fully human — a sentiment that bespeaks not only a political realization but also a spiritual affirmation.

There are faith traditions like mine (Unitarian Universalist) that proclaim an intimate relationship between politically secured freedom and God's work in this world. Some go as far as to declare liberation as God's primary work alongside judgment and comfort. In the history of our country there have been times when we have so insisted on the political form of this connection as to mistake our nation's self-interest for God's work. Accusations of renewed Manifest Destiny have been leveled at the foreign policy machinations of the current administration, particularly with regard to the Iraq War and the alleged motive of extending the reach of American influence and democracy abroad. Such turns have warranted calls for vigilance regarding idolatry.

But with the Iraqi election — amidst the folly of nations, the hubris of leaders, the rancor of politics and religion, the cynicism of the press, the threats of terrorism — there appeared the courage of men and women animated by an intractable spirit. They made decisions, they offered consent, they did something new and, we hope, liberating. Might this courage evidence a holy spirit that transcends faiths, national boundaries, and political and religious agendas? Or is it idolatrous to believe so?

I think I am not alone in hesitating to favor the Iraqi election because I fear God and know my own idolatrous and self-interested inclinations. Endorsing the election would lend credence to a war where I have tried at once to support troops and the Iraqi people, while keeping a critical eye on our own nation's self-interest.

But the image of that Iraqi man — weeping with gratitude and joy — haunts my mind. Does that image, perhaps as religious as political in nature, herald a liberation or a betrayal of humankind and the divine?

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