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Anne-Marie Slaughter and Tod Lindberg

### **Back to Basics; Religion and America**

Speaking to the nation on the night he clinched the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama rejected the kind of politics that "uses religion as a wedge and patriotism as a bludgeon." His words highlight the way faith has once again become a divisive force in American politics.

With the intense focus on controversial preachers and on cases where religious doctrine appears to divide voters, most notably on issues of abortion and homosexuality, we have lost sight of the ways in which turning back to America's founding values - including faith - can once again unite us in the face of common problems.

America's founders believed that religious faith was compatible with other cherished values: liberty, democracy, justice, equality, tolerance, humility.

Indeed, humility and faith went hand in hand; men like Washington and Jefferson were highly conscious of their own small place in the world in the face of a larger force. And as often as politicians invoke Governor Winthrop's "city on a hill" speech to the Puritans, so often do they forget Winthrop's last line: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.

For many people of faith then and now, justice on earth was and is but a pale imitation of divine justice. Yet an imitation it is, and in the sincerest sense. Divine revelation comes with a code of conduct for life on earth.

Some people of Christian faith try to make sense of what they should do by asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" That's not necessarily a bad approach, but it's not what we're getting at here. The Judeo-Christian tradition that grounds and inspires the American experience teaches the virtue of membership in a like-minded community of goodwill, one that extends the offer of membership to others willing to abide by its principles.

What are those principles? We should be concerned not just for ourselves, but for others. We should offer help to those less fortunate. We should not be so unsparing in our judgments that we overlook our own flaws, which we should set about remedying.

We should treat others the way we would want to be treated if we were in their shoes. We should take the value we attach to our own lives as the value we should try to attach to the lives of others in our community. We should be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the preservation of this community of goodwill and the extension of the benefits it represents to others.

These themes recur in some of the profoundest passages of the Old and New Testament. That the first chapter of Genesis describes human beings as having been made in the image of God has long been taken to impose obligations on people not only with regard to their maker but also with regard to each other.

We need to recognize the ways in which Christianity and other religious traditions support or even command such modern principles as liberty, justice, tolerance and equality. Those values are the foundation of a society based on the pursuit of the common good for all members of a community - friends and strangers alike.

Those of religious faith may act in accordance with these principles out of a desire for a heavenly reward (or a fear of divine punishment). But there is also a reward in this world when people act in accordance with such principles. It is the establishment of societies and political institutions based not on the principle that the strong should rule over the weak for the benefit of the strong, but on the regard people have for each other when they recognize one another's rights and the obligations toward others that go along with them.

One aspect of the genius of these arrangements is that they extend a welcoming hand to those from different religious traditions or from none to join the community of goodwill that is not contingent on embracing the faith tradition from which it arose, but on accepting the obligation toward others.

This understanding of faith unifies rather than divides. It makes room for those of many faiths and those of no faith to come together around a set of moral principles for conduct both at home and abroad. Those principles are not abstract generalizations, but rather point to certain very specific foreign policy positions. They require, for instance, that the United States do all that it can to stop the killing in Darfur - the displacement, rape, and massacre of human beings by forces supported by their own government.

They mandate a determined and unrelenting effort to pursue a world without nuclear weapons, free of the horrific possibility of incinerating millions of human beings in a nuclear attack.

And they demand that we react to the possibility that rising sea levels will swamp islands and countries on the other side of the world as a common plight, just as we must accept our responsibility for the world we may be bequeathing to our own children.

It will not always be easy to act on these principles. They will sometimes come into conflict with other important considerations in a world where power politics remains a fact of life.

But we must never abandon them, and we must never ask how little we need to do in order to say we have acted in accordance with them or have taken them into consideration as best we can. Rather, we must ask how much more we can do. As long as a gap remains between what we have done and what remains possible, we must act to fill it.

People will also continue to disagree over the best means to pursue these principles, in terms of policy, personality, and political party. We ourselves are not voting for the same candidate this November.

World history is rife with killing inspired by faith; just as our present American politics often pits worshipers of one faith against those of another in a less bloody but no less ardent combat. We have all heard ample divisive rhetoric from the pulpit, and we cannot fail to note the arrogance that often seems to underlie it, rather than an appropriate humility.

But that is certainly not the only kind of faith. The faith of our founders, and the genius of the system that their faith helped to inspire, can also outline a politics of common moral purpose. It is open to all of us to choose that better path.

Anne-Marie Slaughter is dean of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School and author of "The Idea that is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World." Tod Lindberg is editor of Policy Review and author of "The Political Teachings of Jesus."