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Trump, Madonna and Faith: The Role of Religious Leaders in Common Space

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Both the Pope and Singaporean Catholic Archbishop have recently made statements which show the inter-relationship of religious ethical debate and political and social commentary in common space. The traditional secular-religious divide seems inadequate to discuss and regulate this and may need to be rethought.

Commentary

WITH INTERVENTIONS by religious leaders into the public domain increasingly commonplace, two current ones are of special significance. One is the comments by Pope Francis I on the American Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump. It seemed to suggest that because of his views and policy suggestions he was not a Christian in the Pope's view, though he later qualified his statement to say it was not a personal comment on Trump's faith.

The other is an online message by Singaporean Catholic Archbishop William Goh urging Catholics in the city state to boycott Madonna's concert on 28 February 2016. The former has very much become the stuff of international news, the latter very much a local/ national issue. However, both statements raise issues about the role of religious leaders in public debate and the rights and wrongs of their comments.

The Pope and Trump

The Pope, like many others who have tangled with the master communicator Trump, seemed to come out of his intervention wrong-footed and on the defensive. In terms of his comments, though, it can be seen on several levels. On the one hand it was a comment about the ethics of a man who claims to be a Christian, and so may seem

to be very much within the purview of what may be expected in religious commentary. However, it is not so simple.

First, Trump is not a Catholic, so it raises issues about the inter-denominational appropriateness. Second, Trump is a presidential candidate and the comments concerned one of his policy ideas, to build a wall along the border with Mexico, and so it also entered directly into current politics.

Third, it occurred during the Pope's visit to Mexico, and so – contrarily to our second point – could be seen as simply a statement of support to the Mexican Catholic community. Fourth, relating to the last point, as a major international media figure commentating on another such figure the debates were clearly going to do the rounds in the international press. Fifth, although the Pope was lambasted by some critics for the walls around the Vatican, his comments do link very much to the overall message of his pontificate so far about dialogue, openness, and communication (are they talking physical walls or ideological walls?).

Into this complex arena various comments have been raised: should a religious leader comment on someone else's faith credentials or lack thereof. Some say a religious leader should not make such statements especially about someone from outside their community.

Was it a suitable move as whatever the motivations (speaking to a Mexican audience, or making comments about Christianity as an ideal) it would certainly be seen as a direct intervention into the political life of a specific nation. Should religious leaders make political comments? Before commenting we will discuss Archbishop Goh's statements.

The Archbishop and Madonna

Archbishop's Goh's statements have generated responses from the online community, Singapore's politicians, and local media, including the influential establishment voice of The Straits Times. While released online, the Straits Times and other online commentary assume the Archbishop's comments were directed to the Catholic community alone and were not political in nature, but very much at the level of the faith and ethical commitment.

Although media comment has speculated that lobbying may have taken place to ban Madonna's concert – this is the first time she has been allowed to perform in Singapore, which has often barred performers and stars it sees as morally corrupting.

Nevertheless, there seem to have been worries that the Archbishop's comments may have strayed too far into the public sphere, although the message has been conveyed that it was, in the context, a legitimate moral message to his flock.

The Secular-Religious Division: Useful or Outmoded?

What do these examples tell us about the way that religious leaders do, or should, speak into common space? The last couple of hundred years have seen Western

societies, and societies influenced by Western models, divide the world into what are seen as two distinct spheres: the religious, and the secular.

These two spheres operate differently and are understood in divergent ways in different jurisdictions, while we see historical evolution in the way they are interpreted. In general though, the former is seen as a private sphere to do with personal morality and piety. It is an area wherein those within it may, at most, speak their own language and express their own moral and social views in terms of their tradition.

The latter, though, is the common space into which the former should not directly enter. It concerns public reasons expressed in secular terms and the good of the whole community. Ethical matters within it are expressed in these terms. It should be clear, though, that religious ethics will often rub up against specific public activities or political policies. The two are not neatly divided spheres.

Moreover, while the secular-religious divide has held sway in many countries for decades if not centuries, religious voices are increasingly strident and pushing at the grey border regions. Certainly, it is far from clear that religious commitment can be seen as only private as it will affect our ethical decisions on many matters.

The recent interventions of the Pope and Archbishop both show this. While each made comments that can be seen as internal Catholic (religious community) ethical discussions, they inevitably touch concerns in common space.

While few would want any form of theocracy, which would be open to abuse and oppression, the relation of the religious and secular, even the existence of these as two distinct spheres, has often been debated by scholars. In the years and decades ahead societies need to debate the way that such interventions can and do take place. The older religious-secular divide is artificial and not precise and maybe a new paradigm will be needed to take its place.

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