

A task from God? Take care!

“God’s will” must never be hijacked to serve our own ends

AMERICAN vice-presidential contender Sarah Palin and the suicide bombers in Iraq at last have something they can agree on: the war in Iraq is “a task from God”.

Different task, different God, but those details aside, they are of a mind. She and they are on a mission ordered by the highest authority they can conceive.

I hate to spoil their party, but in making those claims they make a mockery of their faiths and bring their God/Allah into disrepute, which has to be the ultimate blasphemy. Both illustrate how easy it is to take the fateful step from claiming to know what is God’s will, to turning him into an instrument of their own purposes, whether personal, political or economic. God becomes the ultimate rationale for doing what they are intent on doing anyway.

As a charismatic evangelical Christian, Palin is more assured than most that she has a hot line to her deity. Not only is the Iraq war “a task that is from God”, she says, but building a US\$30 billion natural gas pipeline through the Alaska wilderness is also “God’s will”, for it would create jobs and unify people and companies.

Historically, God’s will has a very mixed record. It has inspired some of the noblest acts of service humans are capable of: think of Francis of Assisi’s work among the poor and William Wilberforce’s campaign to abolish the slave trade. And some of the worst barbarities, including witch-burnings, massacres of Protestants in France and Catholics in Ireland, and terrorist bombings in the United States, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Then there are the deranged and deluded who are convinced that God commanded them to maim, kill or, for one Californian, to make a life-size figure of Jesus using toothpicks. Since negatives always impact on the psyche more strongly than positives, many sensible Kiwis will shake their heads and say: “If that is where belief in God takes you, include me out.”

I would make three points. First, religion is just as prone to being hijacked and perverted as any other human enterprise. At its best, it defends and enriches the human spirit. But as with politics and business, power can lead it astray, with charismatic leaders playing on the hopes and fears of gullible followers to promote their own ambitions.

Further, the notion of God’s will depends on a theistic understanding of God – that is, God as a supernatural being existing apart from humanity, who intervenes directly in human affairs and requires his or her followers to be diligent in advancing the divine purposes.

Those who claim to know beyond doubt what God wishes on any issue are all too ready to equate their own perceptions and prejudices with God’s will, and to brand everyone who thinks otherwise as wrong. In this way the Twin Towers inferno and the invasion of Iraq become tasks from God – but it is a God conceived narrowly in terms

of these people's cultural conditioning and national interests. In the process God loses all Godness and is utterly debased.

And important as the theistic understanding has been for centuries (and still is), it is not necessarily the last word on God. Just as in past times the conviction about one supreme God evolved from belief in many gods, and that from animism, so new ways of thinking about God are currently evolving out of monotheism.

Instead of a being with a will that people can call on to validate their actions – “invade that country”, “build that pipeline”, “bomb those skyscrapers” – God is acknowledged as the supreme creation of the human imagination, a symbol of the highest aspirations humanity knows, to help us wrestle with the biggest questions there are: Is there meaning in our existence? Is there purpose in our lives? What concerns are ultimate for us? Is there a way of living that leads to wholeness and fulfilment, both individually and in community?

Those are not questions that politicians, economists or scientists can answer from their disciplines; but they lie at the heart of every religion. Answering them adequately in a secular world, however, requires religion to evolve away from other-worldly speculation and superstition, and to bed themselves firmly in humanity and the Earth.

It follows that the emerging non-realist God has no objective “will” to which people can hitch their pet projects, whether benign or nefarious. Yet there will always be a perspective on living where Godness is demonstrated through acts of love, justice, compassion, respect, kindness, service and integrity.

October 14, 2008

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