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Imagine a World Where Faith Was More than Political Eye Candy

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Imagine a World Where Faith Was More than Political Eye Candy

Abstract

"What is troubling about Cruz's appeal and the legacy of conservative evangelical political engagement he seeks to revive is the assumption that a particular set of political values are "Christian" values, that a particular political agenda rather than fidelity to Christian doctrine and ethical principles becomes the test of orthodoxy. For instance, how does a Christian who disagrees with the Senator about immigration issues fit into his definition of how born again Christians vote? Is there room under Cruz's revival tent for a Christian who sees adoption ministry or sex education as a more effective means of aiding the unborn than passing legislative measures?"

Posting about Ted Cruz' presidential bid and Christian engagement with culture from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/imagine-a-world-where-faith-was-more-than-political-eye-candy/>

Keywords

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Comments

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 inallthings.org/imagine-a-world-where-faith-was-more-than-political-eye-candy/

Scott Culpepper

Senator Ted Cruz became the first Republican to formally toss his hat into the [2016 presidential race](#) on Monday. He will definitely not be the last. Cruz framed his presidential announcement with a speech and a setting that called to mind the Reagan era of the 1980s and the early days of the new religious right under the leadership of Jerry Falwell. The allusions to the past were intentional. Cruz very much sees himself as a possible heir to both the Reagan legacy of reducing governmental reach, or overreach, and the Falwell legacy of recruiting evangelicals to support Republican candidates.

That is why Cruz made his announcement at [Liberty University](#) in Lynchburg, Virginia. Liberty was founded by [Jerry Falwell](#) in 1971 and, with a residential enrollment of 13,000 and an online enrollment of 95,000, lays claim to the status of “largest Christian university in the world.”¹ The school has grown significantly in numbers since its inception, and one could argue that it, like much of the rest of evangelical America, has grown slightly beyond the narrow emphases of its founder as well. In the interest of full disclosure, I have taught online courses for Liberty and have often been pleasantly surprised in my interaction with some of the administrators, faculty, and students there. They defy stereotypes of the school in many ways.

Yet, sadly, it was the stereotype that Senator Ted Cruz was wanting to reinforce on Monday when he rose to address the crowd of Liberty constituents under the electronic gaze of a watching world. His address was vintage 1980s culture war rhetoric. Evoking [John Winthrop's](#) sermon “[A Model of Christian Charity](#)” and Ronald Reagan’s use of Winthrop’s language, Cruz mentioned twice America’s role as a “city on a hill.” He made the claim that “roughly half of born again Christians are not voting.” Continuing his repeated prompt that his listeners use their imagination, Cruz said, “Imagine instead millions of people of faith all across America coming out to the polls and voting our values.”² There was no provision in Cruz’s rhetoric for the possibility that those born again Christians might vote a different set of “values” from the ones that Cruz went on to lay out in some detail in his speech or that they might apply the same values to civil society in different ways.

The troubling thing about Senator Cruz’s religio/political theater is not the idea that Christians should be more engaged in public life. That faith should be an integral part of public discourse is something on which most, if not all, Christians can agree. How faith can be a healthy and productive component of public discourse in a pluralistic society is a much more complicated question and one about which sincere Christians will probably continue to disagree for the foreseeable future. What is troubling about Cruz’s appeal and the legacy of conservative evangelical political engagement he seeks to revive is the assumption that a particular set of political values are “Christian” values, that a particular political agenda rather than fidelity to Christian doctrine and ethical principles becomes the test of orthodoxy. For instance, how does a Christian who disagrees with the Senator about immigration issues fit into his definition of how born again Christians vote? Is there room under Cruz’s revival tent for a Christian who sees adoption ministry or sex education as a more effective means of aiding the unborn than passing legislative measures? One could argue that one of the few lasting positive cultural changes conservative culture warriors have influenced in recent decades has been a noticeable reduction in the total number of abortions and teen pregnancies in America.³ Ironically, politicians like Cruz actually downplay this positive development, a development which did not result primarily from passing legislative measures, but rather

through educating the public about the tragic consequences of abortion and the better alternative options available to them. The culture war mentality of the past all too often seemed to prefer demolishing cultural strongholds by brute political force to the much harder task of winning heart and minds. The end result was that they neither demolished cultural strongholds nor won hearts and minds. As the great English poet John Milton once observed through the mouth of his fictional Satan, “Who overcomes by force hath overcome but half his foe.”⁴

Those who balk at the brazen politicization of faith by politicians are all too often accused of not valuing faith enough when really just the opposite is true. We value faith too much to see it reduced to a trivial tool for political advancement. Faith is vitally important, too important to become captive to something as base and temporal as a political agenda. Our faith comforts us in sorrow, inspires us in adversity, and brings us from condemnation to bask in the comforting warmth of acceptance by grace. It is a powerful force, which is exactly why the powerful desire to harness that force for their own means. Something that affects us so deeply and stirs us so ultimately has the potential to steer us easily and possibly to steer us wrongly when the symbols of faith are wielded carelessly. By the very definition of the word, something that is “harnessed” by someone is rendered subservient to or tamed by that person to serve their ends, to fulfill their agenda. In the political context, harnessing faith can mean that the faith once for all delivered to the saints as good tidings of great joy for all the people becomes the property of a single narrow fallible political faction.

Such a faith is like a beautiful woman brought to a Hollywood premiere by a dashing actor. Her job is to dazzle, look beautiful, and above all to make her companion look good. She may speak, but her words must be carefully chosen to support her companion and his image. The term “eye candy” is often used in urban slang to describe anyone, male or female, who occupies this role. Their purpose is to look good and make their companion look better. Politicized faith from any tradition demotes the sacred to the level of eye candy. It is Christianity that scrapes and bows to secular power rather than confronts the powers that be with prophetic intensity. Properly harnessed, Christian leaders in thrall to the intoxicating aphrodisiac of political power all too often confront the faults of political opponents with apocalyptic rhetoric while ignoring or excusing the worst atrocities committed by their political allies.

Fortunately, the future promises better things. There are strong indicators that the culture war emphasis that Cruz is seeking to revive has little appeal for younger Christians. They understand the complexity of their world and the importance of thoughtful Christian engagement with our pluralistic culture far better than many of their elders. These young believers tend to roll their eyes at the worn old shibboleths of the culture war. They point us forward to a new day when Christians from across the political and social spectrum will invest their talents and their energies in seeking creative solutions to our problems rather than obsessing over our loss of cultural dominance.

Footnotes

1. Liberty University, “[Liberty University Quick Facts](#),” Accessed March 25, 2015. ←
2. Senator Ted Cruz, “[Transcript: Ted Cruz’s Speech at Liberty University](#),” The Washington Post, March 23, 2015. (Accessed March 25, 2015.) ←
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “[Data and Statistics: Abortion](#).” (Accessed March 25, 2015.) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “[Data and Statistics: Teen Pregnancy](#).”

(Accessed March 25, 2015.) [↩](#)

4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Ed. David Scott Kastan (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005) 33. [↩](#)