

Pope Francis and the overlap of politics and religion

By Rabbi Judy Weiss

Posted Oct. 12, 2015 at 2:01 AM

The Rev. John Dear summarized Pope Francis' speech to Congress. However, I, a rabbi and volunteer member of Citizens' Climate Lobby who stood on the mall in Washington listening to Francis' speech, heard an important theme not mentioned by the Rev. Dear: Francis began by defining politics, political society and political leadership. He said: "the chief aim of politics" is "defending the dignity of your fellow citizens" and "demanding pursuit of the common good." He stressed that a political society fosters "the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk."

Most of the speech provided examples of ways good political leaders have preserved, or could preserve, the dignity of all. As confirmation that his speech's theme was the chief aim of politics, Francis concluded by emphasizing that good political leaders have everyone's interests in mind.

Francis' theme reminded me of a religion class I once took. The professor spoke about how to judge if a religion is good: A religious system is good if practitioners are encouraged to transcend personal self-interest, and seek to protect the interests of most people, or those people most in need.

Notice my teacher's definition of good religion is similar to Francis' definition of good politics. Both pursue the common good, especially protecting society's most vulnerable. Good religions and good politics have similar goals: to humbly serve the greater good, thus creating a just and merciful society.

How might we assess members of Congress using Francis' discussion of good political leadership? Remembering that Republicans have controlled the House for 16 of the last 20 years, it's striking that some Republicans have introduced lots of

legislation, but none gets to the floor because a majority of their own party won't support their legislation. Why?

It was suggested by Geoffrey Kabaservice, a Yale-trained historian, writer and a political conservative, that this type of "legislative impotence" correlates with extremism, lack of concern for all, and the desire to destroy our political system. Impotent legislators are so strident that even their own party members can't work with them. They aren't interested in the common good. Also, a review of their religious affiliations indicates that these "impotent legislators" profess loyalty to established religions that honorably, justly seek to protect the interests of most people and the most vulnerable. Yet these political figures arrogantly ignore broad-based aims, favoring extremist goals. They fail based on the measure of what makes a good political leader, and what makes a good religious believer.

If anyone asks how the pope, a man of religion, can opine regarding politics, Francis humbly, thoughtfully and politically answered that, in general, the chief goals of politics and religion align, even if their methods and specific policy approaches would differ.

Rabbi Judy Weiss lives in Brookline.

[LINK](#)