

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

By Rev. Dr. Charles Brock
Brock Institute for Mega Issues

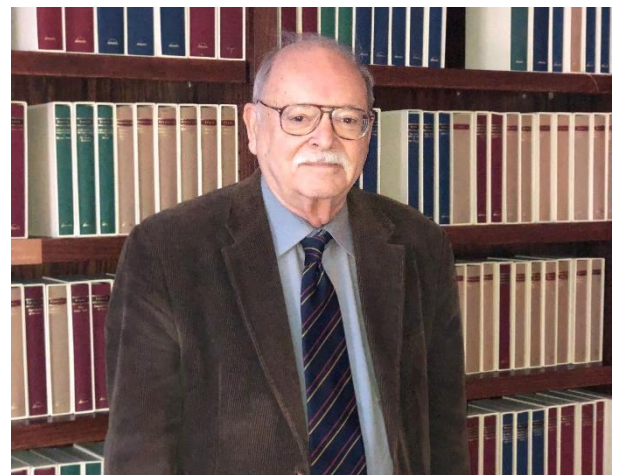
BERNIE, JOE, and DONALD on RELIGION and POLITICS

The following essay is dedicated to my late uncle Everett Zurn, former Chairman of the Democratic Party of Erie County, Pennsylvania.

We have three very interesting candidates for the American presidency this spring. They are far apart in their politics, and though they don't advertise their religions, they all have them and I will suggest there is a strong relationship between their political and religious views, even if they aren't totally aware of it. Many people have political views along with their religious background but are often unaware of the relationships.

U.S. SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS, I-Vt., is Jewish, but a "secular liberal" Jew. There are many forms of Judaism – it really should be written in the plural. And as we shall see, there are many forms of Christianity as well.

Sanders, who is a longshot challenger to former Vice President Joe Biden for the Democratic presidential nomination, is aligned with the prophetic tradition that emphasized justice issues for individuals and the state. He also has been influenced by



the most basic idea in Judaism, the exodus tradition – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – who led the people out of Egypt, gave the Law, and settled the Promised Land. This is the background of the Passover, the most holy time in Judaism along with the Day of Atonement formulated by Aaron the High Priest.

What is the exodus tradition, used by so many other religious leaders, such as Jesus, Paul, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in our own time? The basic text is Exodus 3.7-10:

The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.

8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

So indeed, the people departed Egypt amidst slave-like conditions, crossed the Red Sea, and spent 40 years in the wilderness before entering Palestine under Joshua, Moses’ appointed successor. Every Hebrew liturgical service has references to this event, and all Jewish theologians and spiritual leaders put this in the center of their attention. In modern Passovers, other deliverances are mentioned, including the Holocaust.

Jesus considered himself a new Moses, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. His last speech before his assassination was a reference to Moses on Mount Nebo surveying the Promised Land:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Pure Moses; pure MLK, Jr. And in many ways, pure Bernie Sanders. Bernie uses the prophetic tradition too. Briefly, the prophets looked at their Israel in their day, saw the injustices, and railed against them, wanting a better life for the poor and oppressed. Here are some typical texts:

Zechariah 7:9-10

“Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’”

Jeremiah 22:3

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.’”

Micah 6:8

“He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?”

The prophets are strong defending the widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. God says to the Jews: “You must not exploit a resident alien or oppress him, since you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22.21). Virtually all the Hebrew Scriptures emphasize justice issues, both for the individuals and the nation. But often this is put in the background by ultra-orthodox Jews, even though their main studies of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures) has the exodus as a central theme.

How does Bernie Sanders resonate with these teachings? “Look,” (Bernie) told me, “we are taking on the establishment. Wall Street is now opening up their checkbooks for (Joe) Biden, because we are a threat to them. The pharmaceutical industry strongly supports Biden. Health care stocks went up after Super Tuesday. So, no, I’m not shocked by this. I was born into the white working class, all right?” Sanders told me. “And one of the very sad things that has happened, and this has been statistically demonstrated, is, unbelievably, that the Democratic Party has become the party of the more affluent people, while the Republican Party has become the party of the white working class. “Look, what we’re trying to do is take on the entire political establishment,” he repeated. “We’re taking on the entire corporate establishment, the entire media establishment ... We’re taking on everybody! That’s something that has not been done in American history!”¹

How more prophetic could Sanders get? Like Moses and the prophets of old, he took on the whole establishment. And like most of them, he suffered for it and was rejected by Pharaoh or the king and often the masses. As Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets, and stones those who are sent to her. How often I would have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not. O **Jerusalem, Jerusalem**, you that murdered the Prophets and **stoned** those who were sent to it! (Matthew 23,37)

¹ Robert Draper, *Did America Misjudge Bernie Sanders? Or Did He Misjudge America?* NY Times March 16, 2020 (excerpts)

FORMER VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN is a Roman Catholic. Like Judaism, it should be put in the plural. There are so many types of Catholics – some very much opposed to each other on basic theological points – that it would make sense. But unlike Bernie Sanders, who is a secular Jew, Joe Biden is a cradle Catholic and a strong one at that.

Joe Biden began his political career as a pro-life Democrat but like many other Catholic Democrats, including Ted Kennedy and Ed Muskie, he flipped after *Roe v. Wade*. “Well, I was 29 years old when I came to the U.S. Senate, and I have learned a lot,” then-Senator Biden said in 2008, explaining his switch. “Look, I’m a practicing Catholic, and it is the biggest dilemma for me in terms of comporting my religious and cultural views with my political responsibility.” [This ambivalence](#) is reflected in his 36 percent rating from NARAL Pro-Choice America and his support for a ban on partial birth abortions. Still, during his long tenure as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he repeatedly demonstrated his commitment to *Roe*, enough to earn him the criticism of pro-life Catholic groups.

Continued Biden, “My idea of self, of family, of community, of the wider world comes straight from my religion. It’s not so much the Bible, the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments, or the prayers I learned. It’s the culture.”²

Biden identifies with a left-wing Catholic tradition back to medieval Pope Innocent III, to 19th century Pope Leo XIII, and currently Pope Francis. He even has touches of the most political left-wing movement in the Catholic Church, called liberation theology (M.L. King, Jr, Jeremiah Wright, many South and Central American Catholic theologians of the 1970s).

At the end of the 19th century, in 1891, when the church became very aware of the gaps in society and the oppression of the poor, Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which changed Catholic thinking extensively. The opening paragraph reads: “That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics and made its influence felt in the cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion and the marvelous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy.”³

² Michael Sean Winters, *Joe Biden’s Catholicism*, America, the Jesuit Review, August 23, 2008

³ *Rerum Novarum* 1891 (underlines mine)

Leo declared that while it is the government's job to promote social justice, it is the responsibility of the Church to promote social principles that prevent class conflict. He recognized the importance of a free market, but he warned that the workers must be treated with fairness. He stressed the plight of the urban poor and he condemned unrestricted capitalism, which he believed kept the poor marginalized and oppressed.

Pope Francis comes from the Latin American tradition of liberation theology – they take the biblical exodus as a parallel and keynote for understanding the oppression of the masses today.

Here is what Biden has said about this: In an interview published by the Catholic magazine “America” in September 2015, Vice President Biden called Pope Francis “the embodiment of Catholic social doctrine that I was raised with. The idea that everyone’s entitled to dignity, that the poor should be given special preference, that you have an obligation to reach out and be inclusive. ... And I’m excited, quite frankly, as a practicing Catholic. I’m really excited that the whole world is getting to see what are the basic essential elements of what constitutes Catholicism.”

And while Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment has rankled some conservative Catholics in the U.S., Biden suggested he was simply calling on world leaders to deal with the obvious threat of climate change. “The way I read it – and I read it – it was an invitation, almost a demand, that a dialogue begin internationally to deal with what is the single most consequential problem and issue facing humanity right now,” Biden said.⁴

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP – He doesn’t talk up his religion, but he is a Presbyterian born and bred. His grandfather was a German Lutheran. The small town of Kallstadt has only one religious building, the Central Lutheran church, but the area is overwhelmingly Calvinist. Trump’s father, Frederick Christ Trump, was born in the Bronx, and his mother was born in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, a land famed for its strict Presbyterianism. They were both members of the Reformed Church of America. Donald Trump is a member of Marble Collegiate Church of NYC, a Presbyterian church, but with its famous former minister Norman Vincent Peale, there has been an emphasis on “prosperity gospel” and self-help tips for prosperous living rather than the Calvinism of Germany and Scotland^{5,6}

A few words about Calvinism, probably the most influential Protestant theology in America (though not the biggest – Baptist and Methodist outgun the Presbyterians, and the Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest).

⁴ Juliet Eilperin, *Biden: Pope Francis is ‘the embodiment of Catholic social doctrine that I was raised with’* Washington Post Sept 21, 2015

⁶ My mother and dedicatee Evertt Zurn’s sister and I attended when in NYC. Mother liked it because “the prayers are short.”

“While Lutheranism was largely confined to parts of Germany and to Scandinavia, Calvinism spread into England, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, the English-speaking colonies of North America, and parts of Germany and central Europe. ... Geneva became the center of an international movement and a model for churches elsewhere. John Knox, the Calvinist leader of Scotland, described Geneva as ‘the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the Apostles.’”

Calvinism was immediately popular and was appealing across geographic and social boundaries. In France it was attractive primarily to the nobility and the urban upper classes; in Germany it found adherents among both burghers and princes, and in England and the Netherlands it made converts in every social group. In the Anglo-Saxon world, Calvinist ideas found embodiment in English Puritanism, whose ethos proved vastly influential in North America beginning in the 17th century.”⁷

There are some famous views associated with Calvinism, especially from Max Weber about the relation to the spirit of Capitalism. Roughly his argument is that Calvinism expressed support for hard work, frugality, discipline, avoidance of life’s pleasures, and willingness to defer satisfactions is a formula for wealth individually and nationally. Earning money is a gift from God and there is a religious duty to do so. Calvin was not a keen supporter of the poor, as was his German counterpart Thomas Munzer, the leader of the Peasants Revolt. The rich very much liked Calvinism.

“Calvinism entailed *that* people were predestined to be either among the saved or among the damned. There was nothing that the individual or the religion as a whole could do to affect that fate.

Yet the idea of predestination left people uncertain about whether they were among the saved. To reduce this uncertainty, the Calvinists developed the idea that signs could be used as indicators of whether a person was saved. People were urged to work hard, because if they were diligent, they would uncover the signs of salvation, which were to be found in economic success. In sum, the *Calvinist was urged to engage in intense, worldly activity and to become a ‘man of vocation.’*”⁸

There are other parallels. “Calvin believed that humans are subject to two kinds of government.” There is the “the kingdom of Christ,” which “is situated in the soul ... and relates to eternal life,” and there is the “civil government,” which relates to “civil justice and the regulation of external conduct.” Calvin was clear that, although these two governments are not at “variance” with one another, they are nevertheless “things very different and remote from each other.” He went so far as to describe it as a “Jewish folly ... to seek and include the kingdom of Christ under the elements of this world.”⁹ In

⁷ William J. Bouwsma, *Calvinism*, Encyclopedia Britannica, revised 2018

⁸ From Max Weber – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, excerpts from Chrome ISA, 2020

⁹ Jonathan Cole, *A Calvinist Take On Why Evangelicals Support Donald Trump*, Political Theology Network, Dec 12, 2017

other words, keep government out of religion, and Trump and the evangelicals strongly agree.

What Trump completely ignores is one of the stoutest and foremost points in Calvinism – its emphasis on sin, forgiveness, and repentance. He is (in)famous for his statements on “I did nothing wrong. I have nothing to confess.”

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), very much an Anglican Calvinist at least in his liturgies, wrote a prayer of confession still widely used in Anglican churches today. Interestingly, later versions dropped the underscored phrases that were strict Calvinism:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that be penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind, in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy name. Amen.

Every Reformed service worth its moniker begins with a prayer of confession similar to the one above. And what follows are words of forgiveness. Repentance – changing one’s ways – is then expected.

Regarding Capitalism, ironically, Trump likes socialism for the rich but not for the poor. According to Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor: “Trump is promoting socialism for the rich and harsh capitalism for everyone else in other ways. GM has got more than \$600m in federal contracts, plus \$500m in tax breaks. Some of this has gone into the pockets of GM executives. Chairman and CEO Mary Barra raked in almost \$22m in total compensation in 2017 alone.

“Sixty percent of America’s wealth is now inherited. Many of today’s super-rich have never done a day’s work in their lives. After a few generations of this, almost all of the nation’s wealth will be in the hands of a few thousand non-working families. To the conservative mind, the specter of socialism conjures up a society in which no one is held accountable, and no one has to work for what they receive. Yet that’s exactly the society Trump and the Republicans are promoting for the rich.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert Reich, *Trump offers Socialism for the Rich, Capitalism for Everyone Else*, Guardian UK, Feb 11, 2019

CONCLUSIONS

Bernie Sanders is good on relating the concerns of the prophets to Wall Street profits that take away from the poor. But he underappreciates all that the stock market and commerce have done for the nation.

Joe Biden is good on applying liberal Catholic thought to the nation without need for revolution, but he might be lax on seeing all the oppression that is going on in full sight of all who will look and listen.

Donald Trump is good on hard work, rather odd on capitalism, but weak on sin, and like ancient Israel dismisses or downplays alliances such as NATO and others. Like Israel, he wants to go it alone.

They are all rather weak on Isaiah's vision of Israel which was used by Jesus to define his mission:¹¹

I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in the darkness."¹²

Isaiah was the only prophet to create this wider vision for Israel. This idea was not normal for Jews then or now. Jesus had to fight with the disciples for this vision as well. And the churches in America do not have an easy task convincing people of the need for a world-wide mission of justice and peace as suggested by Isaiah and Jesus.

Let us hope that our worthy candidates can return to this vision not only for America and themselves, but for the world.

¹¹ Luke 4.16-18

¹² Isaiah 42. 6-7

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend and is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa. He is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society, where he serves as Secretary of the Board of Trustees.

Rev. Brock also serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Robert Draper, Did America Misjudge Bernie Sanders? Or Did He Misjudge America? New York Times March 16, 2020 (excerpts)
- 2 Michael Sean Winters, Joe Biden's Catholicism, America, the Jesuit Review, August 23, 2008
- 3 Rerum Novarum 1891
- 4 Juliet Eilperin, Biden: Pope Francis is 'the embodiment of Catholic social doctrine that I was raised with' Washington Post Sept 21, 2015
- 5 My mother and dedicatee Everett Zurn's sister and I attended when in NYC. Mother liked it because "the prayers are short."
- 6 William J. Bouwsma, Calvinism, Encyclopedia Britannica, revised 2018
- 7 From Max Weber – The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, excerpts from Chrome ISA, 2020
- 8 Jonathan Cole, A Calvinist Take On Why Evangelicals Support Donald Trump, Political Theology Network, Dec 12, 2017
- 9 Robert Reich, Trump offers Socialism for the Rich, Capitalism for Everyone Else, Guardian UK, Feb 11, 2019
- 10 Luke 4.16-18 11 Isaiah 42. 6-7