

POLITICS AS USUAL: Faith & Politics

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I watched a lot of television while I had the flu.

Not much else to do seeing as I was virtually incapacitated.

Reading made me nauseous. Knitting, sewing ? same thing - so that left me with just TV. Hours and hours of TV. I cannot think of something more mind numbing than multi-day marathons of TV. It is truly a soul-sucking experience.

Anyway, watching that much TV afforded me the opportunity to binge watch a few good programs (thank you Netflix!) ? House of Cards (both seasons again), Boss (both seasons) and as much West Wing as I could find. What can I say, I am a bit of a political junkie.

While watching the programs one after the other after the other, I noticed a curious and recurrent theme throughout all three programs ? God, or more specifically, politics and God. I should not be surprised. Their money is emblazoned with the motto ?in God we trust?. That God should figure so prominently in American society is not unexpected.

However, American politicians have an odd relationship with religion. On the one hand, they are fiercely proud of their version of democracy. It makes a very clear distinction between church and state and never the twain shall meet (unless you live in Texas, or Utah for example?but that's another column)

And yet.

Personal piety and obvious religiosity are vitally important should a candidate want to get elected. Professions of personal faith ? faith in God ? are de rigueur for the current, has-been and wannabe politician alike. I cannot even imagine a candidate stating that he or she is an atheist or even an agnostic. It would be a non-starter.

Going to church ? and being filmed going to church, bible in hand (family bible handed down for generations no less) is pretty much a standard election shot in America. And yes, I am sad to say that despite the melting pot society of which they are so very proud, it is still primarily a church, not a mosque, or temple, or Shul that is the assumed house of faith for America's leaders.

Don't believe me? Recall the unseemly debate during the 2008 election about Obama's religion ? first about whether he was a Christian and then about whether he was the ?right? kind of Christian attending the ?right? kind of church. That should belie any protestations about whether or not religion matters in American politics.

Faith is a prop in politics. That's disappointing, but true. Regular church goers often remark that they know an election must be imminent because candidates all of a sudden start showing up to church, whole families in tow, to sit in the front row. They don't fool anyone, but my goodness they do put on a show.

That being said, no politician ? current, has-been or wannabe ? would actually campaign in a church (or temple or mosque or Shul) though. That's too low even for a politician. Not even the crassest of the crass would dare hand out election materials (like pamphlets or cards) in a house of faith.

The fallout amongst the faithful would be immediate and tremendous. Campaigning in a house of God is an affront to the religious sensibilities of even the most lapsed of church-goers.

We have seen them electioneering outside a church though many times. Taking the opportunity of a large gathering of the faithful for self promotion. For example, Ford supporters were rumoured to have handed out fridge magnets outside the funeral for Peter Worthington. Obama and more recently, Trudeau, took a selfie with a ?fan? on the steps of the church while attending a funeral service.

In Canadian politics, personal religious beliefs have less direct bearing on a candidate's ?electability?. Religion is still important to Canadians, but it is seen as a very personal matter. We do not feel it is our business to discuss where a politician worships, much less think less or more of them for their faith or lack thereof.

My faith is important to me, just as yours is to you. I respect your faith and your right to practice it just as you respect mine. That's the Canadian approach to religion and politics. It is far less hypocritical. Woe betides the politico ? current, has-been or wannabe ? that loses sight of that fact.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.