

High Stakes For Church and State

For many people of faith, the elections have shown that what is needed is nothing short of a new confession of Christ.

by Jim Wallis

Almost every day I do interviews with reporters who start the conversation by saying, "I am doing a story about religion and the election." As we suspected many months ago, religion has turned out to be one of the critical factors in this election.

That was demonstrated again by a National Public Radio story in mid-September about a "swing voter" in West Virginia. Now in her 70s, this woman had voted in every election since she was 21 years old. But this time, she felt more conflicted than ever. She told the NPR reporter that she thinks the war in Iraq was a mistake and is turning into a real mess. "We shouldn't have gone to Iraq," she said. "I feel Bush took us into that." But, she said, she likes the way he talks about his Christianity and brings his faith into "what he's doing." On the other hand, we have lost so many jobs in West Virginia, she said, and that leans her away from the president again. But she's with him on gay marriage and abortion. Her conflict exemplifies both the policy and cultural issues that define this campaign.

When reporters start talking about the "religious issues" of this election being abortion and gay marriage, I correct their narrow perception that reduces all Christian ethics and values to one or two hot-button social issues. Then I begin talking about how poverty, the environment, the war in Iraq, and our response to terrorism are also key religious and values questions that will influence the votes of people of faith. That wider perspective always make sense to them,

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and their stories then take a broader view of the issues at stake.

The coverage of religion and politics has begun to change. Some writers honestly admit that they used to cover only what members of the Religious Right had to say about politics, because they were the loudest voices; but this year the media sees more moderate and progressive religious voices showing much more visibility and impact and, therefore, the press wants to present a more "balanced coverage."

Sojourners' very successful petition/ad campaign—"God is Not a Republican. Or a Democrat"—has helped a lot. It suggested that endorsing political candidates is a fine thing, but ordaining them is not—the way that some leaders of the Religious Right have named George W. Bush as "God's candidate" in this election and proclaimed that real Christians can only vote for him. Just making it clear that good people of faith will be voting for both George Bush and John Kerry in this election for reasons "deeply rooted in their faith" was an important statement.

As for how the campaigns and candidates themselves have treated the issue of religion in this election year, the differences between Republicans and Democrats are still very stark (see *The Politics of Piety*). The Bush campaign's chief political strategist, Karl Rove, has made no secret of his intent to aggressively reach out to religious voters. But

in doing so, the Bush re-election team has overstepped the proper boundaries of church and state by suggesting religious "duties" that include turning over congregational membership lists to local Republican parties. That offended even members of Bush's own religious base. And in mailings to churches in some states, the Republican National Committee has suggested that "liberals" will "ban the Bible" and "accept gay marriage." Frankly, I have never seen such outrageous behavior by a political party in trying to manipulate religion for its own agenda while so disrespecting the faith of millions of other believers who disagree with the Republican political agenda. The Republicans claim to "own" religion. And the Democrats still don't seem to know how to "take back the faith."

If the Republicans have overstepped in their religious outreach, the Democrats have under-stepped in their effort to be more "religion friendly" than they have in the recent past. Listening better to religious voices both inside and outside the Kerry campaign would have provided more strategic help and public capacity in speaking to the important issues of religion in this election.

To be fair, the Democrats, both at their convention and in their campaign, have tried to offer a new open door to the religious community in important ways, and Kerry has begun to talk about how his own faith influences his values. But Kerry could have done much more to speak to religious audiences, talk to the religious press, and redefine the

"religious issues" at stake in this campaign—away from just abortion and the Eucharist, to include poverty and war. The Democrats should be much more willing to use moral and religious language in defense of economic fairness and justice. But they shouldn't make the same mistake the Republicans have made in trying to co-opt religious leaders and communities for their political agenda.

The Democrats' attempts to reach out to the religious community and counter the now infamous "God Gap" between the two parties have been a step in the right direction. But win or lose in November, there is no question that the Democratic Party will be moving much more deliberately to embrace religious communities and concerns, to use moral and religious language to argue for social reform, and to learn from the lessons of progressive religious movements in American history in advancing their agenda for the future. In large part, that direction of affirming progressive religion is coming from spiritually devout Democratic elected officials who feel they have been religiously disrespected not only by Republicans but even by those from within their own political ranks.

BUT WHAT DOES prophetic religion have to say about this election?

Religious and political conservatives often raise the issues of abortion and gay marriage. I have clearly disagreed with the Democrats on abortion, believing that Christians can be

both "progressive and pro-life." I've urged the Democrats to be much more respectful and welcoming of "pro-life Democrats." Someday, a smart Democrat will figure out how both pro-choice and pro-life people could join together in concrete measures to dramatically reduce the abortion rate by focusing on teen pregnancy, adoption reform, and real support for low-income women. That would be so much better than both sides just using the issue as a political football and political litmus test during elections, and then doing little about it afterwards.

I also have strongly affirmed the critical importance of strengthening marriage and family and of supporting parents in the most difficult and important task in our society, but have opposed a gay marriage amendment as politically unnecessary, constitutionally dubious, and socially divisive.

But there are two issues in this election year that most tug at my heart, worry my Christian conscience, and compel me to faithful citizenship and discipleship. The first is poverty, the second is war. And in both the issue is our confession of Christ.

As the Bush administration began, I joined a small group of religious leaders to meet with the new president. We encouraged him to commit himself to a concrete and measurable goal in the battle against poverty—such as cutting child poverty by half in 10 years, as the British Labour government under Tony Blair had pledged. I

thought a Republican president, in the name of "compassionate conservatism," could make new progress on the critical issue of poverty, much like Nixon going to China. I supported the president's faith-based initiative, much to the chagrin of Democratic friends, but from the beginning of the Bush presidency we have had a very consistent message: Significant resources must be committed to serious poverty reduction, not just in a faith-based initiative but especially in budget decisions, tax policies, and spending priorities.

Two years later, a statement organized by Call to Renewal and signed by more than 34 Christian leaders across the theological and political spectrum concluded sadly that the president had failed the test of resources and priorities, which made our continuing support for his faith-based initiative "increasingly untenable." Without the resources and policies to seriously reduce poverty, the faith-based initiative became words without backing, "faith without works." A faith-based initiative could have been done differently, with the resources and policies to back it up; but this one has turned out to be a big disappointment, with policy failures such as the denial of child tax credits to low-income families that would have brought the biblical prophets to the White House lawn.

Other priorities were just more important to the Bush administration than poverty reduction. Tax cuts that mostly benefited the wealthy were more important, the war in Iraq

was more important, and homeland security was more important without the key recognition of how poverty, despair, family instability, and social disintegration undermine our national security. A budget based on a windfall of benefit for the wealthy and harsh cuts for poor families and children is an unbiblical budget. The good people who have run the White House faith-based office were clearly not the ones making policy and budget decisions for the Bush administration. One result of the lack of White House leadership has been the steady rise of the number of people, families, and children living in poverty in each of the last three years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And that is a religious issue.

In his speech to the 2004 Republican Convention, the president spoke about many important issues—education reform and opportunity, health care security, job training, support for low-income families and neighborhoods. There are new and promising directions in his notion of "an ownership society," which focuses on things such as tax credits, educational equality, and home ownership for lower-income families as an alternative to only relying on entitlement programs.

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, conservative writer David Brooks laid out a vision for progressive Republicanism which has a clear role for the positive action of government to make work actually work for low-income families with a whole range of wage supplements and wealth

creation for poor working families. There were signs of such a vision in the Bush speech. But the president failed to deal with how his central domestic priority, "making permanent" his tax cuts that most benefit the wealthy, will simply not allow such positive government initiatives—because of a lack of resources. The Brooks vision will never be possible if Republicans stick to their characteristic anti-government ideology that is so reluctant to spend money to reduce poverty. George Bush has not changed that mentality, but rather submitted to it. Until it changes, the poor will continue to suffer.

From what I have seen and heard of George Bush (including in small meetings and personal conversations I've had with the president) I believe his faith to be both personal and real. And I also believe that he has a heart genuinely concerned for poor people. But I think the president is often guilty of bad theology. On the issue of poverty, George Bush believes in a God of charity, but not a God of justice. And after Sept. 11, George Bush's theology became much worse and much more dangerous.

THE HEART AND PASSION of President Bush's speech and of the whole Republican Convention was a ringing defense of the Bush administration's war on terrorism and the war in Iraq; and an attack on John Kerry as too weak, indecisive, and "unfit to command," bolstered by the "Swift Boat" attack ads on John Kerry's Vietnam record.

In the furious August debate on that topic, the press eventually began to scrutinize the credibility and accuracy of those attacks on Kerry's military service (after the damage had already been done), but has mostly stayed away from the most controversial question about Vietnam—whether the war was fundamentally and basically wrong, and characterized by the regular commission of "war crimes." That's what the young and decorated naval officer John Kerry testified to Congress when he came home from the war. I was also a young anti-war organizer then. I say today, 30 years later, that what he said was true then and is still true now, and it was John Kerry's finest political hour.

But the country is still polarized over Vietnam and is again over another war. There is no disagreement in America about the need to protect our families, our nation, and the world against terrorism and that this vicious and, yes, evil terrorist violence must be defeated. But whether that goal and our national security were advanced or whether they were seriously damaged by the war in Iraq is indeed the real and divisive question. Nobody was willing to "take the word of a madman," as the president has caricatured his war opponents, but many of us, including most every major Christian body in the world, believed this "war of choice" to be unnecessary and unjust.

Even as an opponent of the war, I found the most moving part of Bush's convention speech to be the stories of his times with military families who had lost their precious

loved ones. Those losses are heartbreaking for all of us (as the loss of Iraqi lives should be too). Spending time with those who have lost a brother, a son, a daughter, a mother or father, a husband or wife has been a heart-breaking experience for me. But the most heart-wrenching question is whether they were tragically unnecessary.

Congress voted to give the president the authority, but Bush misused and abused that authority in how and when he took America to war. Now we are in a real mess and George Bush should not be allowed to get away with the deceptions, incompetence, and consequences of this awful war. The war in Iraq was wrong from the start, and most every religious body in the world has said so. A Christian president has ignored the conviction of the vast majority of the world's Christians that the war in Iraq was wrong and that there is a better way—a more effective and morally consistent way to fight terrorism.

Bush's war in Iraq is the beginning of a long-term strategy that is both mistaken and terribly dangerous for the future. My oldest son is 6 years old, and my other is a year and a half. If America's present course continues, they will be facing endless war in their lives, still in Iraq and who knows where else. Many Americans hope there is a better way.

AN EMERGING "Bush theocracy" has for me become the primary issue in this election campaign. I've been talking to a number of other theologians and ethicists who are deeply

concerned about more than partisan politics and this election. We are concerned about President Bush's "war theology."

In a world wracked with violence and war, the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God," are not only challenging, they are daunting. The hardest saying of Jesus and perhaps the most controversial in our post 9-11 world must be: "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." Let's be honest: how many churches in the United States have heard sermons preached from either of these Jesus texts in the years since America was viciously attacked on the world-changing morning of Sept. 11, 2001? Shouldn't we at least have a debate about what the words of Jesus mean in the new world of terrorist threats and pre-emptive wars?

Confessing Christ in a World of Violence

The most important thing for the church in this time, or any time, is the confession of Christ. We see the confession of Christ itself under attack from three very dangerous developments. First, we see an emerging "theology of war," emanating from the highest circles of the U.S. government. Second, we hear, with growing frequency, the language "righteous empire" being employed by those same political leaders. Third, we observe a presidential talk of "mission" and even "divine appointment" of the United States and its leaders to lead "the war on terrorism" and "rid the world of

evil," in ways that confuse the roles of God, church, and nation.

The issue here is not partisan politics, and there are no easy political solutions. The governing party has increasingly struck a religious tone in an aggressive foreign policy that is much more nationalist than Christian, while the opposition party has offered more confusion than clarity.

The issue here is the danger of political idolatry. The other issue is the use of the politics of fear, which is a dangerous basis for foreign policy. Such political idolatry at the highest levels of American political power, combined with effective campaigns of fear that too easily co-opt anxious people—believers and unbelievers alike—could together lead our nation and our world to decades of pre-emptive, unilateral, and virtually endless war, despite the clear warnings of Christian ethics. A biblical theology is being replaced by a nationalist religion. Presidential speeches are even misusing both scripture and hymnology by changing their meaning for the purposes of American power. Biblical references such as "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it," are changed from referring to the "light of Christ," from the gospel of John, to the "ideal of America" in the war on terrorism.

We need a new confession of Christ. For such a confession, there should be at least these affirmations:

1. Christ knows no national boundaries nor national preferences. The body of Christ is an international one, and the allegiance of Christians to the church must always supercede their national identities. Christianity has always been uneasy with empire, and American empire is no exception.
2. Christ pronounces, at least, a presumption against war. The words of Jesus stand as a virtual roadblock to any nation's pretension to easily rationalize and religiously sanctify the preference for war. Jesus' instruction to be "peacemakers" leads either to nonviolent alternatives to war or, at least, a rigorous application of the church principles of "just war." The threat of terrorism does not overturn Christian ethics.
3. Christ commands us to not only see the splinter in our adversary's eye but also the beams in our own. To name the face of evil in the brutality of terrorist attacks is good theology, but to say "they are evil and we are good" is bad theology which can lead to dangerous foreign policy. Self-reflection should provide no excuses for terrorist violence, but it is crucial to defeating the terrorists' agenda.
4. Christ instructs us to love our enemies, which does not mean a submission to their hostile agendas or domination, but does mean treating them as human beings also created in the image of God and respecting their human rights as adversaries and even as prisoners.

5. Christ calls us to confession and humility, which does not allow us to say that if persons and nations are not in support of all of our policies, they must be "with the evil-doers."

The words of Jesus are either authoritative for us, or they are not. They are not set aside by the very real threats of terrorism. They do not easily lend themselves to the missions of nation states that would usurp the prerogatives of God.

In an election year, Christians must assert their faith in ways that confess Christ as Lord, and confront any and every political idolatry. I believe the theology of war, the mission of righteous empire, and the divine appointment of the American nation in a "war on terrorism" are modern political idolatries that the churches must resist, in the name of both faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship.

In any election we choose between very imperfect choices. Yet it is always important to prayerfully and theologically examine what is at stake. And then, as best we can, we seek to confess Christ—even in our political lives. In this election, there is a great deal at stake and Christians, divided by political loyalties, are all responsible for asking the question, "What does it mean to confess Christ in the election of 2004?"