

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The first and most important thing to be said about the 2004 elections is that no one understands what happened. There are any number of theories based on what someone considers the key poll numbers, but any conclusions have to be tentative. What is certain is that a great many of the 55 million people who voted for John Kerry were stunned, shocked, amazed at the result. The soul-searching to find reasons for the defeat will go on for months and even years (the 2008 campaign having begun the night of the election), but one has to try to make some sense of the data and the situation at hand.

Religion no doubt played a considerable role but no one is sure how. When Time magazine released a poll in the early summer showing that only 7% of the population thought that Kerry was religious, his fate was probably sealed with that one fact. The attacks that came from some Roman Catholic bishops had some effect but probably not a lot. Still, 57% of white Catholics voted for Mr. Bush, remarkable even if Mr. Kerry were not a practicing Catholic.

MOVING FORWARD, REMAINING TRUE
Dave Robinson

There can be no mistaking the role that the churches played in the outcome of the election. The Catholic church played a crucial role in affirming an agenda that in far too many aspects runs counter to much of what the Church has long stood for. How could segments of a church with a tradition of social analysis and teaching dating back a hundred years become so easily coopted by the very forces it has spent a century challenging?

Whether the election of George W. Bush leads to the elimination of abortion in the United States is an open question. I sincerely doubt it. What is absolutely certain and beyond any question, however, is that every child that is born in Bush's America will be more likely: to die before they reach their fifth year; suffer from hunger; spend their childhood and perhaps their whole life in poverty; have

their opportunities and dignity hobbled by institutional racism; face a lifetime of conflict over diminishing resources from oil and water; inherit an astronomical amount of federal debt; face a stranger they have been told is their enemy in deadly combat; have no access to health care; live homeless; be incorporated into the criminal justice system if they happen to be born with non-white skin; and live in a rapidly deteriorating environment that will become increasingly hostile to the human species. I don't even know what to imagine the life that a non-U.S. unborn child will face upon their birth into Bush's New World Order.

Moreover, if they happen to be born into a Catholic family, they will live in a church that may well be unrecognizable. If leaders in the U.S. Catholic church continue to trade off the bulk of Catholic social teaching for the sake of a truncated life agenda that begins and ends with abortion and stem cell research, the Catholic world they inherit here in the U.S. will be very different from that which produced *The Challenge of Peace*, *Economic Justice for All*, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, or *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. They will inherit a church that no longer holds a preferential option for the poor. The Beatitudes will be downgraded to just so many of those negotiable issues. A justice, if that word survives at all, will be narrowly redefined as an eye for an eye.

To its credit, the U.S., Conference of Catholic Bishops produced and widely distributed their election year statement, *Faithful Citizenship*, which did address the broad range of Catholic issues relevant to the election and called upon Catholics to judge all candidates, all parties, all platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity and rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.

Unfortunately, there's no getting around the abject failure of far too many dioceses and parishes within the Catholic church to visibly assert these positions on the full breadth and depth of Catholic social teaching, or defend them in the media. The silence allowed those very few voices, articulating a much narrow interpretation of Catholic values to dominate the public discourse throughout the election season, and to an alarming degree, rewrite Catholic identity in a way to render it almost unrecognizable.

Progressive voices in the Catholic community did attempt to recover, but with far fewer resources. Bishop Tom Gumbleton, Bishop Gambino Zavala and Bishop John Snyder lent their voices in support of a sign-on statement, *Called to Embrace All of Life* and later to a print ad campaign *Life Does Not End at Birth*. So did more than 200 Catholic institutions.

But the silence from most of the rest of the church was deafening. If church leaders cannot articulate a coherent Catholic worldview that at once renounces a neoliberal, unilateralist, militaristic and racist agenda while upholding the seamless garment commitment to all life issues, then they cede the debate to those who will offer another view - whether it is authentically Catholic or not.

It was only a few years ago that polls consistently reported that religious values and positions of churches on public policy matters influenced only ten percent of voters. There has been a sea-change in how people identify their core motivations. We should not discount this because some political operatives were able to cynically but effectively manipulate the framing of the issues or the images that passed for authentic faith (e.g. Bush photo-ops with Pope John Paul II).

We should recognize that there are many people who are desperately searching to find meaning in an increasingly complex and frightening world. The challenge is to ensure that progressive Catholic voices of faith at the national, local and regional levels are a part of any effort to build a wider progressive faith movement in this country that can effectively speak to those confusions and that fear.

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT?

Jack Miles

Ralph Reed boasted last September that he had seventy-three thousand volunteers in Florida. They were motivated not just by conservatism, but often by If the United States is to arrest its accelerating slide toward one-party government, the Democrats must find a way to make that phrase not just thinkable but inspiring. Then, turning inspiration into hardball, they have to muster the nerve to attack the Republican agenda of rampant self-interest and deference to wealth as a disaster to Christianity.

This won't come easily to the minority party, but the truth is that George W. Bush talks a better Christian game than he plays. To begin with, he does not regularly attend church. As Amy Sullivan put it in the October 11 *New Republic*, "The Emperor has no church." The president's churchgoing habits appear more liberal-Democrat than conservative-Republican. Jimmy Carter, a liberal who taught Sunday School for his entire term as president, puts Bush to shame.

Shaming the opponent on religious grounds is scarcely the Democratic style, but that must change, or one party rule is here to stay. Shame worked in the civil rights era. It can work again. Read the Gospels. No one knew better than Jesus how to shame. Jim Wallis, liberal Evangelical and editor of *Sojourners*, put it this

way:

Our vision - a progressive and prophetic vision of faith and politics - was not running in this election....Kerry did not strongly champion the poor as a religious issue and Amoral value, or make the war in Iraq a clearly religious matter. In his debates with George Bush, Kerry should have challenged the war in Iraq as an unjust war, as many religious leaders did - including Evangelicals and Catholics. And John Kerry certainly did not advocate a consistent ethic of human life as we do - opposing all the ways that life is threatened in our violent world.

The deeper challenge, however, is not how to reclaim political Christianity but how to breathe life back into the Founding Fathers' vision of a religiously neutral state in a religiously diverse society. That vision brilliantly accommodated the several forms of Protestantism competing for leadership in late eighteenth-century America, but its core commitment derived from the Enlightenment. It was Enlightenment tolerance that enabled the United States to enrich itself by the assimilation of Catholics and Jews and, since the mid-1960s, of Hindus and Muslims in numbers large enough to matter.

For two centuries, the enlightened American way in religion commanded the warm allegiance of virtually all Americans. In the past thirty years its power to inspire began to fade. Though American liberalism cannot afford to surrender Christianity to the foe, that battle is not the only one that lies ahead and we have not yet begun to fight.

RELIGIOUSLY AMERICAN

Gabriel Moran

There seems to be a fairly wide consensus about a cultural divide in the country. Given the murky and ambiguous meaning of Acultural, the explanation does not explain much. One has to dig down into what people mean by cultural, a word that has both biological and religious roots. In recent discussions of multiculturalism (which mercifully seem to be coming to an end), almost everything except religion was thrown into the discussion. The political left in this country does have a problem with religion. It cannot suddenly be (or pretend to be) religious. However, it has to make an effort to understand how religion functions in people's lives, especially in the United States of America..

Throughout history, religion has been associated with morality; both words refer to the practices that shape a person's life in relation to family, community, nation, cosmos and the origin of all. For the last several centuries, Western nations have

tried to separate religion and morality. The hope has been for a morality that can stand on its own foundation. Religion has been tolerated for those who still need it with the hope that religion might give added support to morality. However, in cases of conflict religion has to be superseded by a rationally based morality.

The whole experiment is confused by the fact that so much of what is assumed to be a rational morality is a secularized version of Jewish and/or Christian morality. Perhaps that could not be avoided but the cloudy brew of religion and morality that passes for secular morality leads to confusing political - and cultural - conflicts. Religion hides out in the left while often being attacked or dismissed. On the right, religion is vigorously asserted but the rhetoric obscures its profound influence on the domestic and international policies of the U.S. government.

Born in the eighteenth century when French philosophes were proclaiming a secular morality that would replace Christianity, the United States was founded by enlightened gentlemen, and the U.S. Constitution was determinedly secular. However, the Constitution would not have been ratified except for the first amendment that gave free reign to the preaching of Christianity.

The meeting place of the rationally enlightened gentlemen and the preachers of God's kingdom on earth was the myth of America, a word that meant the end of time but could be and was secularized into meaning future abundance. The term Liberty found ready acceptance in both camps; everyone in the states united by the myth of America, believed in the sacred cause of liberty.

Starting in the 1890s, the United States began to acquire the political, economic and military power to back up its message of freedom. After the Second World War the United States became the dominant player challenged only by the myth of Communism, with its own Jewish and Christian roots. Communism had no chance of dislodging the myth of America. It took root mostly in economically backward countries. When the Soviet Union tried to keep pace with the military might of the United States it collapsed from within.

The United States had won the cold war but in much of the world desperately poor people sought help in religious and quasi-religious movements. The United States did not cause their lives to be desperate and poor but resentment at the U.S., which has five percent of the world's population and twenty-five percent of its consumption, is understandable. As the United States has been building a bigger and more powerful military to support its message of freedom, much of the world seethes in resentment.

In the United States memory is short. Most of the world has a much longer memory. The march of the United States military under the banner of America reminds them of the Christian crusaders. Seemingly innocent of the connotations, Crusade has been the favorite word to describe every U.S. war in the twentieth century. Poor George W. Bush was taken to task for simply repeating the standard line: America does not fight wars; it is the banner of crusades.

Terrorists talk about attacking America; they never mention the United States. It is surprising that until 2001 the United States seemed immune to attacks within its own borders. It is also surprising there have been no serious follow ups. Of course, the success of Sept. 11 was spectacularly beyond the wildest dreams of the attackers. But it would hardly take a mastermind to send explosives in a ship cargo, poison an urban water supply or let loose a deadly gas in the subway.

Since the point of terrorists attack is to terrorize, it is possible that would-be-terrorists simply gather around their television sets and watch the terror engendered by their threat to attack. That homeland security's perspicacious protection is what has prevented other attacks seems ludicrous, but more than fifty percent of voters said they thought the country safer since 2001.

The most important effect of Sept. 11, 2001 is that America has overwhelmed the United States. The tension has always been there and the possibility that the myth would absorb the country. The present leaders of the United States could be called shameless in their exploitation of America except they are only dimly aware that that is what they are doing. George W. Bush seems genuinely convinced that he is the president of America instead of the United States. Given the history of the United States and the absorption of the United States by America, the Republican campaign strategy was nearly unbeatable.

There may have been nothing that the Democrats could have done that would have unseated a president in the midst of a war in which America's prestige - the very meaning of the term America - is at stake. Still, it would have been good to see the Democrats strike out a direction for the future, to engage the Republicans with ideas and distinctions. The Democratic leadership don't seem to grasp how morality, religion and what is called patriotism are related in this country. The Democratic party has resources within its own history and in the lives of tens of millions of people but there is confusion in articulating a position.

The day after the election the most quoted statistic was from a National Election Pool Questionnaire showing Amoral values as the number one concern of voters. And 80% of people of that group voted Republican. Within a few days a strong

reaction set in; it was pointed out that only twenty-two percent of people selected Amoral values@from a closed menu of choices. The main Republican pollster said Af you give people a list of seven and you asked them what-s their top concern and the highest number is twenty-two, that means there is no consensus.@ The twenty-two percent was not much different from 2000 or 1996.

The agonizing over the twenty-two percent figure was premature and excessive. But before Amoral values@is dismissed, the Democrats need to think about what people are trying to get at when they use the phrase and why Democrats fare badly with it. The problem does not seem to be a single moral issue, such as homosexuality. Despite the voting down of gay marriage in all eleven states where it appeared on the ballot, the remarkable fact is that about sixty percent of people favor either civil unions or marriage for gays. Forty years ago, sixty percent of people probably would have denied that homosexuality exists. Similarly, eighty percent of people are in favor of abortion being legal under some conditions. Almost two-thirds of the country is against reversing Roe v. Wade.

The political left is largely responsible for talk about Avalues.@ This peculiar word, arising from economic theory, came into ethics via German philosophy in the nineteenth century. John Dewey used it in his ethics but it was not much used in the United States until the middle of the twentieth century. It became a favorite word of 1960s radicals who wanted to dislodge Avirtue,@with its historical connections to Christianity. Values were to be freely chosen by the individual, unhampered by traditional rules and discipline. The right wing in this country was horrified by the idea of Amoral values.@ They wanted something Aobjective@such as the ten commandments.

Under Ronald Reagan, the right hit upon a brilliant strategy. Since Amoral values@ could be anything you wanted them to be, why not fill them in with warm feelings of family, patriotism and good character. The phrase Amoral values@though still vague would be more definite and suggestive than the liberals=vacuous meaning. When Avirtue@made its big comeback in the 1980s, signaled by William Bennet-s books, the right had both sides of the moral debate. Virtue and value, which had been opposites, became interchangeable. The left had been snookered again by the right and were left literally speechless.

Whether there can be a moral life without a religious or quasi-religious foundation is still in the testing stage. But the people who call themselves Asocial@ conservatives - Asocial@being another word stolen from the left in the 1980s - know that most people in the United States connect morality to religious language. The commonly named source, the ten commandments, is usually a

stand in for the American way of life. The Democrats produce good laundry lists of programs (minimum wage, health insurance, environmental protection, etc). Those programs are at the heart of morality but the country does not seem to recognize these questions as moral. The connection to Christianity should be evident. Eric Gioia of New York's City Council recently said: I always talk about Matthew. When I was hungry, did you give me food? When I was thirsty, did you give me drink? When I was in prison, did you give me comfort? This is New Testament stuff? Well, that's Democratic stuff.

It would be embarrassing to see many Democrats trying to get religion and to compete with the other side in its use of religious rhetoric. But it would not hurt Democrats to stop being condescending toward religious belief and religious believers. They could also start learning that their social programs have religious roots. The progressive reforms in the early twentieth century that culminated in FDR's programs had leadership from evangelical Protestantism. An acquaintance with Catholic social teaching might help Democrats to talk about moral values. Why was there no talk about moral values including not killing people in preemptive wars and not oppressing the poor.

The gatekeeper to any serious change in the country is learning how to use the term America. The left is constantly on the defensive because it has not thought through its use of the term. It ranges from trying to outdo the right at pandering to occasionally using verbal attack. (Senator John Edwards's campaign theme of two Americas was an example of the Democrats inability to talk about the United States). The task is difficult but not impossible. The Report of the 9/11 Commission is a remarkable text because it actually talks about the United States and its government. Some people thought it should have gone further to name particular people as liars, but that is asking too much of a government report. What it did do was get at least close to some truths by talking about the country in contrast to using mythical language.

The only other current book worth reading on this topic is Jon Stewart's America (the book). In the guise of a high school textbook, it playfully shows up many of the country's truths to be fiction, a fact that made it too controversial for Wal-Mart to sell. The National Publishers Association, in naming it the best book of the year, said it was a serious critique of the two-party system. Politicians who wish to understand the country might profitably study it and adapt some of its ironic style which seems to be the only way to penetrate what passes for moral concern in the present administration of the United States government.