

# THE ALTERNATIVE

September 2004  
Vol. XXXI No. 1

Dear Reader,

The present issue is on a topic that has been much written about but which is still puzzling: religion and politics in the United States. Both political parties make not-so-subtle pleas for religious support. In one of the essays that follow, Andrew Greeley disputes the claim that religion is the chief indicator of voting patterns; the voter's income matters much more. Nonetheless, religion seems to be a big part of the mix in this year's politics.

Catholics are of special concern to both parties. Once solidly Democratic, Catholics have been migrating to the Republican Party since they helped elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. A recent Gallup Poll shows Kerry with a 51 to 45 edge among Catholic voters. That is not the kind of plurality that John Kennedy could assume in 1960. The essays in this Newsletter are mainly about Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, two highly prized species. Is it surprising that the votes of the five or six million Muslims in the country are not eagerly sought?

To most of the world all these religious distinctions are beside the point. They believe that the religion of the United States is America, a word that has had religious connotations since its birth in 1507. Such a religious meaning is more true than ever today. And it is why religion is such a puzzling factor in our politics. The absorption of Christian and Jewish meaning by ~~A~~America@makes it difficult to sort out politics and religion.

Mr. Bush's speech at the convention began by his accepting the nomination to be president of the United States. That was the last time in his hour long speech that he referred to the United States. He did refer 60 times to America/American, a religious or quasi-religious idea about the country. Nearly everything in the speech that was said about America (land of hope, promise of freedom, liberator of the oppressed...) is true. But conditions in the United States received the same attention as did Osama bin Laden: not a word.

---

Correspondence and Contributions to: Alternative Religious Education  
Box 1405, Montauk NY 11954; GM1405@aol.com

## THE RELIGIOUS POLITICS OF 2004

By Carol Eisenberg

Rarely has the mixture of religion and politics been as calculated and potentially explosive as it has been this year in the race between George W. Bush, born again Methodist, and John Kerry, practicing Catholic. It is not just between the faithful and the secular, but between competing groups of believers who have sharply different divisions of what a pluralistic democracy should be.

Republican partisans promote the notion of a red state God who, they suggest, gives divine sanction to a ban on same-sex marriage, abortion and stem-cell research. Democrats, like U.S. Senate candidate Barack Obama of Illinois, testify to the Awesome God in the blue states, whose Sermon on the Mount is the inspiration for social programs for the poor favored by that party.

Let's not presume one group is religious because they say they are, said the Rev. James Forbes, senior pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan and a leader of Mobilization 2004, a campaign to register progressive people of faith as voters. There's got to be an awareness of the needs of the poor and the marginal. Otherwise, it's not religion at all. There's a Negro spiritual 'Everyone talking about heaven ain't going there.'

Beyond the religious rhetoric, this year's campaign is notable for the effort by both parties to capitalize on a much-touted link between belief and electoral choices - from the Republican effort to get churches to turn over their membership directories and to distribute issue guides to their flocks, to the explosion of God talk at the Democratic convention.

Harnessing religion for political ends is hardly a new phenomenon or confined to one party. Former Democratic president, Bill Clinton, was a master at talking about his Southern Baptist faith, publicly mentioning Jesus Christ even more regularly than George W. Bush - 5.1 times a year compared with 4.7 for Bush, according to Paul Kengor, a political science professor.

While the most frequent churchgoers vote overwhelmingly Republican, the God-gap is overstated, said Steven Waldman, editor of Beliefnet.com. The broad middle of both parties is very similar: They believe in God, they pray, they believe in an afterlife. And for those people, he contends, the identification of a candidate's religious beliefs is often a proxy for steadfastness, morality and strength of character. A survey by Pew in 2002 found that 58 percent of

Americans said belief in God was a prerequisite to personal morality, compared with just a third of Germans and even fewer Italians, British and French.

The fact that George W. Bush is viewed as a person of religious conviction translates into him being a person of conviction. Period, Waldman said. Which makes people trust him as a fighter against terrorism. Conversely, what freaked out the Kerry campaign was that the view he was not a man of faith was feeding the perception of him as a waffler. Part of why they made a big show of faith at the Democratic convention had nothing to do with the culture wars or the effort to attract Catholic voters, but to show he is a man of strong convictions.

The Rev. Richard Land, a Southern Baptist leader, tells the story about how a woman he met recently demanded to know how you people have gotten such influence in this country. I said, Well, there's a lot more of us than there used to be. In 1960, 22 percent of voters were evangelical Christians. Now it's somewhere between 33 and 34 percent. Isn't democracy grand? Land went on to say that the things that propelled Southern Baptists into public policy were defensive. We weren't trying to change America as much as we were trying to keep it from being changed in ways we thought morally reprehensible.

Democrats are undergoing their own defensive transformation, courting religious moderates, including suburban evangelicals, Muslims and Catholics. Of particular interest are Catholic voters with a quarter of the electorate and concentrated in swing states. Bush has tried to make inroads by touting his faith-based initiative to give federal funding to religious groups that provide social services, as well as his opposition to abortion rights and gay marriage. So far, though, his reception has been lukewarm. The Bush music has not rung their chimes, said Mark Silk, director of the Leonard Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life. And I'm willing to bet a nickel that that's because Catholic social teachings matter to them. They don't like the Republican preferential option for the rich.

Where all this is leading on election day is anyone's guess. Jim Wallis, an evangelical minister who is editor of Sojourners Magazine, said that as he travels around the country attempting to mobilize progressive voters, he sees the power of the religious right waning. But Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, isn't worried. I think George W. Bush is a product of long-term and growing social and cultural movements. The things he believes in have tremendous support within certain segments of the population. And whether he wins or loses, the next Republican candidate for president will look a lot like him.

## BISHOPS AND POLITICS

By Gabriel Moran

The U.S. Catholic Bishops are threatening to become the Ralph Nader of 2004. And Mr. Nader hasn't even gone away yet. Both of them operate from a moral high ground in criticizing the presidential candidates. Their moral principles may be unassailable but the unintended result of their actions could be moral disaster. Nader's influence in the 2004 election is likely to be much less than in 2000. But the Catholic bishops -even a small minority of Catholic bishops - could have a significant effect by the way they comment on the presidential candidates.

The U.S. bishops seem to operate from three principles: 1) A Catholic politician cannot separate private beliefs and public performance 2) Catholics need to resist certain aspects of U.S. culture 3) Abortion is an evil that Catholics cannot support. I think that all three principles are correct. But, as often happens, the problem lies in relating these principles to the world of politics. Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco recently responded to a group of Catholics in Congress that we bishops have a lot to learn about the practicalities and the steps involved in political judgments, including political platforms and party relationships. We have to envision a dialogue that is not just one way. One can hope that all the bishops are similarly convinced.

Many editorials and letters to editors have asserted that a politician's private beliefs should be kept entirely separate from his or her political activity. The formula of church and state is regularly invoked. But no Catholic who has a sacramental outlook and a sense of the need for moral integrity can accept a private-public dichotomy.

Since the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on peace in 1983, the Roman Catholic church has been more critical of U.S. social, economic and military policies. Up to John Kennedy's time the question was whether Catholics could be as American as other citizens. The issue today is whether the Catholic church can effectively criticize particular policies of the government, including those on war, pollution, taxes and welfare, capital punishment, care of the dying, sexual exploitation and abortion.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Catholic bishops give the impression of being so obsessed with abortion that they miss the overall moral picture of the country. An obsession with abortion has two results: a failure to address other moral problems in the United States and a failure to actually reduce abortions.

The U.S. bishops insist that while other moral issues have room for debate and compromise, abortion is an absolute evil and a politician can only address it as such. That is not a helpful stand and bishops conferences in other countries have not understood Catholic belief to require an absolutist approach in the politics of abortion. Politics always involves compromises which can either be intelligent and morally defensible or else a sell out of one's moral principles. A person convinced of the evil of abortion should do what is possible and effective to resist that evil.

The first step would be to discuss abortion policy in morally intelligent language. Three decades ago the U.S. Supreme Court decriminalized abortion, taking the government out of the decision that was thereby left to the woman and her physician. The timing and the basis of the decision have often been criticized. As in most areas, the Supreme Court is not a judge of morality but of U.S. law. The Catholic church's teachers would have a legitimate complaint about the phrase "Abortion rights," as if abortion were some kind of human right. For the vast majority of people, abortion is a tragic necessity. It is allowed because millions of people sincerely believe that it is the best choice they have within the present limits of their life.

If any group is interested in reducing abortion, they would speak accurately about it while working for such things as better sexual education, improved birth control, wider access to the best means of birth control, more help for poor, pregnant women, attention to the health care and welfare system applied to children. What they would avoid is accusing fellow citizens who disagree with them of being murderers or approving murder. A politician who does not think it would be wise to reverse *Roe vs. Wade* is not by that fact approving abortion. One thing sure is that changing the law would not eliminate abortion; it probably would not decrease it.

The analogy is often drawn with slavery. Would it have been morally defensible for a nineteenth-century politician to say, "I'm against slavery but I have to uphold the laws of the United States?" Saying one is against an evil is not convincing if there is no evidence of opposition beyond one's statement of belief. But at any moment of history one's political possibilities are limited. Politicians should not have to carry the whole burden of change and they should be allowed to argue for change in ways that they see as politically possible.

Take another analogy that is contemporary. Presumably the Catholic bishops are against pornography. The country is awash in pornography and one might be convinced that it is corrupting the moral fabric of the country. Why does U.S. law

allow it? Why not insist that politicians vote against it? Why would the Supreme Court not even approve of filters to protect children? The answer is that access to pornography comes with freedom of speech, freedom of the press. A politician who does not vote to censor pornography is not by that fact approving or supporting pornography. Perhaps wiser legal decisions could have been made decades ago. But today the tens of millions of people who partake of pornography are not going to be put off by censorship laws. There could still be a value in some restrictions on pornography, particularly according to age, even though the Internet has drastically altered whatever approach seemed valid until very recently.

The most passionate opponents of abortion will say that an analogy to pornography limps. They are right; all analogies limp. If abortion is equated with murder, then even the analogy of slavery is inadequate. But if any distinctions are allowed in the political dimensions of abortion, Catholic church leaders would find allies in opposing moral insensitivity about abortion. The Catholic church is admirably concerned with the protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. It has been very helpful in recognizing the complexity of natural death while opposing a rush to physician-assisted suicide. The bishops have yet to show an understanding of the politics surrounding abortion. If they are willing to do what Archbishop Levada has said, they could contribute to scientific, social and ethical reforms that would reduce the perceived need and the practice of abortion.

\*\*\*\*\*

LETTER TO THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS,  
Paul Baumann, Editor of Commonweal

The church's position on abortion seems straightforward enough: Innocent life is to be protected from the moment of conception. Complications soon arise, however. In Catholic teaching, exceptions are not allowed even for abortions following rape or incest. Is it your position that this teaching should be enacted into civil law, and that Catholic politicians who do not work vigorously toward this end are not in full communion with the church? Presumably most of you would answer no, agreeing with St. Thomas that an unenforceable law that is perceived to be unjust undermines the very idea of law itself. If morality and law cannot be separated, they are nonetheless distinguishable. Not everything sinful need be illegal. In a democracy, law must rest on the consent of the governed. That means living with some evils to avoid greater ones.

One thing is clear about the abortion debate in the United States: There is no

consensus for making all abortions illegal. Nor is there a consensus for subjecting women or doctors involved in abortions to criminal penalties. Are the bishops advocating the recriminalization of all abortions - or something short of that? If criminalization is the goal, what penalties would you think just for the guilty? Would the father be subject to criminal penalties as well as the mother and doctor? You have a responsibility to grapple with the practical as well as the moral dimensions of public policy issues that you seek to influence.

The Catholic Church has waged a courageous, often thankless, fight against abortion. It has been right to do so, and it has provided an invaluable witness to the intrinsic value of life in the womb. But let's be frank. In the aftermath of the sexual-abuse crisis, the credibility of Catholic bishops on issues related to sexual morality is greatly diminished. Trust will not be restored soon or easily. The church's prohibition against contraception, which is inscrutable to most Americans and unconvincing to most Catholics, also weakens its case against abortion. Worse, the church's refusal to condone the use of condoms for married couples, even when one partner is HIV-positive, is morally obtuse at best.

Simply put, the church's absolutist rhetoric undermines your case against abortion, alienating potential allies and placing impossible demands on Catholic politicians. Thirty million American women have had abortions. A way must be found to enlist the good will and eventually the consent of these women if abortion law and practice are to change. The church hasn't figured out to do that. As Archbishop William Levada recently wrote "while bishops have long been engaged in teaching and internal church dialogue, that dialogue has not been effectively engaged at large." You need to redouble your efforts at dialogue, not because you are wrong, but because you are right. As such, it is imperative that you find a better way to make your case.

The give and take of democracy is based on the implicit willingness of adversaries to compromise, even on questions of how best to uphold fundamental morality. Slavery was a great evil, yet not even Abraham Lincoln sought to forcibly abolish it where it was deeply rooted. Instead, he embraced an incremental approach, insisting that it not be extended to new territories or states. He thought that once slavery was contained it would collapse of its own inherent contradictions. Catholicism possesses the intellectual and moral resources to help craft such a compromise on abortion. Yet too many Americans, including Catholic Americans, think the church will tolerate only one solution to this dilemma. To be persuasive in the long run, you must show that more than one path is possible.

## A HIDDEN SWING VOTE: EVANGELICALS

By Andrew Greeley,

We are repeatedly told that evangelicals form the president's unshakeable electoral base. But in truth, this claim is vastly simplistic: the fashionable image of masses of white evangelical voters, marching in lockstep to deny rights to women and to gays, is hardly borne out by the data. Rather, the real Republican base is the same as it was before Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" appealed to religious Protestants in 1968: the wealthy and the powerful.

Data about the last two presidential elections, drawn from the 1998, 2000 and 2002 elections from surveys carried out by the National Opinion Research Center, found that one-fifth of white Americans who belong to Fundamentalist churches are remarkably pluralistic in their political and social attitudes. While it is true that white evangelicals tend to be more conservative socially than the average American, there is little correlation between religious conservatism and political conservatism. About 40 percent of Americans who believe in the literal interpretation of the bible describe themselves as politically conservative.

In the last two presidential elections, about 62 percent of white evangelicals voted Republican - or about 7.5 percent more than among other American Protestants. In terms of the electorate as a whole, it's hardly fair to say evangelicals are a dominant political force. Clearly, claims that evangelicals have hijacked the nation's politics are greatly exaggerated. In fact, polling data show that George W. Bush's real base is not religious but economic, the group he jokingly refers to as "the haves and the have mores."

The survey found that 20 percent of American voters have family incomes of more than \$75,000 a year, while twice that many earn \$30,000 or less. The high income group (about the same size as the evangelicals) votes Republican by an 18 point margin, while the low income group favors Democrats by 24 percentage points. If the Republicans were to lose their 18 point advantage among the affluent, it would cost them about four percentage points nationwide in the election, more than twice the cost if they were to lose their edge among evangelicals.

And neither region nor religion can override the class divide: if recent patterns hold, a majority (about 52 percent) of poor Southern white evangelicals will vote for Mr. Kerry, while only 12 percent of affluent Southern white evangelicals will. More poorer Americans of every faith - including evangelical Christians - vote for Democrats. It's a shame that few pundits, pollsters or politicians seem to notice.

