

Fall 2007

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

FAITH AND CITIZENSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES





ON THE COVERS:

A Renaissance of Public Art

These are a sampling of lamppost banners produced by children, teens, and others for a public arts project that joins personal creativity and civic virtue.

The muse behind it all is JoAnn Moran of New Haven, CT, who runs rePublicArt. Her aim is to expand the possibilities of public art by encouraging community participation, cityscape beauty and social change.

The street banners are created from recycled billboard canvas and displayed along downtown avenues—banners that adorn street posts and stir local spirit.

"This work invites people to take responsibility for their public environment," says Moran.

"We're in such need for people to take on a sense of stewardship for humankind and the earth."

Moran has worked with towns all over the country, visiting schools, bringing youngsters together to paint murals and banners inspired by phrases from the Constitution, America the Beautiful or the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. In 12 years she has involved some 60,000 people, getting individuals "to make art together."

Inspiring people to create "outdoor walking art galleries" is an alternative to a public climate of fear or indifference.

"Art takes us out of our everyday thinking patterns," she declares. "The aim of public art, as opposed to all the consumer messages we see in public, is to provide a visual enticement to make you think more deeply about social issues. Public art creates possibilities. I believe it can make a difference."

(For more information see rePublicArt.org, or appliedimagination.org, the website of her collaborator Steve Dahlberg.)

INSIDE:

Black & White Photographs from the Library of Congress

*These images were selected from the vast collection of photos of the federal Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>). The photos were taken between 1935-1945 in an effort to document the effects of economic crisis and war upon the nation. The collection produced some 164,000 images of American life, a landmark in the history of documentary photography. (See *From the Editor*, p. 76.)*

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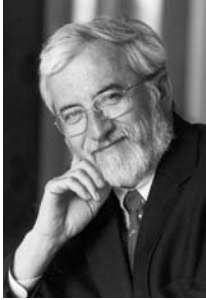
Serene Jones—faculty guest editor

FAITH AND CITIZENSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES



Itinerant preacher's truck parked outside U.S. Capitol, 1939 (John Vachon, photographer)

From the Dean's Desk



Harold W. Attridge

Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

In recent years religion has asserted itself as a major factor in the politics of our nation and around the world. In the United States, the conversation about religion and politics has increasingly been framed around the question of the power of the Religious Right, or as a struggle pitting personal moral values against moral values that seek to serve a public good.

As we considered the topic at YDS, we came to see how useful it would be to frame the issues involved in a fresh way, by examining the relationship between our identity as people of faith and as citizens. This is not simply an American question but a matter that requires a global perspective as well.

This issue of *Reflections* is, in part, an outgrowth of several initiatives and conferences over the last year that have attempted to engage this conversation. One such effort was the conference in May on "Faith and Citizenship" featuring *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne. A portion of his address appears in this issue of *Reflections*. Dionne ended his conference address by declaring that, "We are destined to visit, over and over, the relationship between religion and our aspirations to pluralism, freedom, justice and democracy. Only by doing so will we be able to respect the serious moral commitments of believers and unbelievers alike." As the world becomes more and more interconnected, the need to revisit these tensions between religious and other allegiances grows more urgent.

At other times this year we have enjoyed lively gatherings of clergy, theologians, and laity from many walks of life—politics, diplomacy and journalism—all willing to share a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives. These included two conferences titled "Voices and Votes," which were organized and led by students, and an important new student/faculty program called the "Initiative on Religion and Politics." From these many conversations, we have culled a range of viewpoints,

both national and global, reflecting on faith and citizenship. We hope these articles individually and collectively contribute to a vital public discourse concerning faith in public life.

Among the many contributions to this issue, we are especially appreciative of the work of Congressman David Price, a Yale alum with graduate degrees in both Divinity and Political Science. Long before issues of faith and politics attained their present-day high profile, Congressman Price had long given attention to this important, complex discourse. He reminds us in these pages of the admonition of Reinhold Niebuhr: "Like 'God-fearing' people of all ages, we are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire." In that vein, Price warns, "The most powerful argument against religious and political pretension is not secular but theological. Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence."

We are privileged to include here also an interview with Jan Egeland, who recently served as undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator for the United Nations. His words frame the challenge: "...religion should play a role to bring us perspective: There is a higher ideal, a higher purpose in life."

In a presiding spirit of theological humility but also urgency, we offer these articles probing the intersection of religious and civil virtues, which takes place now in such a volatile global climate of religious intensity, fragile national identities, and globalization. As other contributors here argue, we have little choice but to engage the question: Christian tradition calls us there. "I am called to participate," writes Yale theologian Serene Jones, "because God is still participating."

Finally, I wish to thank all of those students, alums, friends, and colleagues who have given leadership to this discourse. I offer special thanks to the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation for its support in advancing these conversations. I am indebted to my colleague Serene Jones, Titus Street Professor of Theology, for serving as guest faculty editor for this issue.

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What Do We Desire?

The Future of Faith and Citizenship

By Serene Jones

Faith and politics: there's no hotter topic in North America today. Surf cable television, navigate through YouTube—these windows into our public life quickly showcase politicians, car mechanics, and grade-school teachers all weighing in on the matter with great passion and commonsense smarts.

For a Christian theologian like myself, this fomenting sense that “God-matters” really matter to so many is exciting. Not since the 1960s have we seen such intellectual seriousness about faith. But it's clearly not an easy endeavor. Opinions are strong, stakes are high, and our disagreements generate gale-force intensities. Inevitably, these conflicts speak to what we value most—our deepest desires and most enduring commitments.

Out of these conflicts, I believe, are paradoxes worth nurturing. They reflect the unique promise of wrestling with religion and politics on American soil. We believe, for instance, in keeping church and state separate while also mobilizing passions around the injection of religion into politics—that's good. We don't see a contradiction between being people of the Bible and promoters of the Enlightenment—that's a strength. We are the most religious people in the West while also being insistently secular and avidly technological—a rather amazing combination. We are a country marked by a bone-deep diversity that also values a strong universalizing vision of the public good—a combination worthy of praise.

Other conflicts, however, are more confusing and less noble, many of which rage not between different religions or between religious and secular persons but within the world of North American Christianity itself. As a theologian, I am often called to sit on panels or weigh in on debates between church folks over hot-button issues—we know the list well—and in the middle of such discussions I find myself wondering what it is we are arguing about. On the surface it seems we are fighting about the issue at hand—whether same-sex couples should be mar-

ried, what state and federal laws on abortion should be, how long troop withdrawal from Iraq should take—but underneath the arguments lie murkier matters worth paying closer attention to.

What is “faith” and how does it relate to “citizenship”—not just at an easily calculated, artificial-level but at a soul-deep, everyday-life level? How do we get beneath the surface scuffles to a richer theological discussion about what we believe God desires for our lives—a central question if “faith” is prepared to take up its calling to be publicly wise.

Staying alert to these questions ought to allow us to identify more sharply what we *do* agree on—theologically—and discuss more meaningfully where we *don't* agree—again, theologically.

In the years ahead, many of these partisan battles will intensify in the media and in local churches, the majority of which claim a core relation to that quintessential North American Protestant heritage—the Reformed theological tradition. It is interesting and ironic that despite our divisions, most Protestants, left or right, actually share a tradition of Calvinist habits of thought or faith—which means we share a lot with respect to the core doctrines that shape us. What does the Reformed tradition have to say about the relation between faith and citizenship? Can it mend some of our divisions? Can it reorient the debate?

Beyond the Self-Dividing Self

When North American church folks talk about faith and politics, we make several common mistakes that confuse matters to no end. One is a tendency to look inside ourselves and divide our interior worlds into a segmented list of roles we play in daily life, two of



Salvation Army, San Francisco, 1939 (Dorothea Lange, photographer)

which are the “faith-self” and the “citizen-self.” We then announce, in very pious terms, that our faith-self be given priority. The game goes something like this: I first list my parts—I am mother, teacher, dog-walker, Okie, Christian, Democrat, block-watch member, eBay-shoes buyer, U.S. taxpayer, cancer survivor, hot-sauce lover, writer, and so on. I then say to myself, in order to be faithful, I need to distinguish each one from the other and then prioritize them—making the Christian part come first, the mother part second, with Democrat following as a distant third, and so on until the eBay part (I hope!) settles into last place.

This view of things—an identity politics version of piety—doesn’t make much psychological sense if you consider how we actually make decisions. We can’t compartmentalize ourselves into various “roles” that get stacked up in order of importance. When I step into the voting booth, I don’t suddenly

When I pray, I don’t somehow magically turn off the Democrat part of myself or shut down that small corner of my brain that likes spiked black heels.

stop being a mom who’s worried about the gas bill. When I pray, I don’t somehow magically turn off the Democrat part of myself or shut down that small corner of my brain that likes spiked black heels. There is just one messy me—a hodge-podge mix of all these things, carrying on the many tasks that constitute my daily life, grappling with it all as it unfolds, often in a rather chaotic swirl of half-baked plans and partially actualized possibilities.

This view doesn’t make sense from a theological perspective either—particularly a Reformed one. Calvinist accounts of “faith” have long insisted that belief is never simply about propositional claims or discretely measurable liturgical actions. Rather, it lives in dispositions formed in us by our traditions, our faith practices, our communal interactions. These deep dispositions don’t just go away when we step into another “sphere” or put on another “hat.” They ground and orient all parts of us, even our unconscious life and our bodily postures.

Providential Politics

In Reformed theology, the doctrine of Providence is one place where we reflect on these matters. It’s a popular mistake to assume that Providence simply means God is in control of everything and has our lives all plotted out, and that those uncanny

surprises to us are the prearranged orchestrations of a puppeteer-creator. No, Providence teaches us something much more existentially complex than this childlike view. It tells us God is God of the whole of our existence—every nook and cranny of it. As far as our imaginations can reach and our actions can stretch, there we find God dwelling with us, in fullness. God is not just God of our morning prayers but of our evening baths, our ten o’clock snacks, and our midnight television watching. To use a popular Reformed image, faith lives in the marrow of our being.

Similarly, we need to expand what we mean by “political.” When the great political philosophers of the West, the Greeks, imagined the realm of the “political,” they didn’t think only in terms of voting booths, war rooms, or legislative sessions. The term *politics* comes from *polis*, which means the city—the public realm, the place of our collective lives. To do politics was to reflect upon and determine the shape of our shared existence and the nature of our ongoing interactions. Talking politics means telling the story of our life together—a story that includes an account of our greatest frustrations and failures as well as our grandest aspirations and hopes.

Thus, in the United States, we would do well to broaden our understanding of “politics.” Though it should certainly include the usual suspects of the political rough-and-tumble—campaigns, red-flag issues, governmental structures and processes—our collective lives include much more, things we like to think of as “private” but which profoundly determine how we live together. I mean the stores we shop in, the houses we buy or rent, the TV docudramas we watch, and the music that fills our iPods: these are all spaces in which we collectively abide. Similarly, our “political” relationships are not just those we have with elected officials or co-warriors wearing our political party hats and fighting as Reds or Blues. They also include our interactions with our children and our lovers, with the person next door, the woman who runs the cash register at the garden store, or the teenager who delivers the paper. Insofar as each of these is part of our shared life, they are all deeply political relations.

So, just as faith permeates all, politics infuses everything. Here we have two realms that not only cannot be separated; each of them appears to include within its scope the whole of existence.

When faith and citizenship are viewed like this, it shifts the terms we use for imagining faithful citizenship. We are made aware of the swirling mix of both

faith and citizenship in all dimensions of our everyday, collective lives. We don't ask, "What does my faith say to my political views?" Rather, "How does faith dispose us toward collective life?" and, "How do the actual contours of our public lives shape the character of our piety?"

Viewed this way, Christian faith looks a lot less different from Islamic faith than many today would expect. The conventional outlook asks us to look at a Muslim and a Christian and to identify a fundamental difference between them. Right off, what we profess to see is that the Muslim believes that her faith should determine all aspects of her political life and that the line between her faith-practices and her political actions is nonexistent—whereas the

My Christian dispositions of heart and head are what lead me to embrace the central features of the democratic political system in which I live.

Christian understands the limits of her faith, and because she is living in secular democracy, she is willing to cede certain aspects of her religious life to claims made upon her as a citizen. Summed up, the difference is: Islam doesn't draw a line, Christianity does.

This strikes me as a completely wrong-headed account of our differences. If we approach this Christian-Muslim issue from a Reformed Christian perspective, then my relation to my role as citizen is as thoroughly saturated with my faith commitments as hers. My Christian dispositions of heart and head—the faith-gestures that fill my interior world—are what lead me to embrace the central features of the democratic political system in which I live. The space I cede to the "secular" I cede on religious grounds; the line I draw between what I do in church and what I do in a multi-tradition public sphere is a thoroughly faith-inflected line. The limits I put on God-talk, I do for God-reasons. From head to toe, my political instincts are as religious as hers are.

Once I admit this, I can enter discussions with her about religion and international affairs without adopting a condescending Western attitude toward Islam that pits her views against my more secular, open-society position. Instead, I can engage her in a conversation about politics that allows me to identify the theological commitments that fund my politics, just as I continue to listen to hers. Even though this posture doesn't ensure that we will

reach consensus or avoid sharp conflicts between us, it does keep the conversation from veering off track in its early stages simply because one side is deemed more "religious" than the other when it comes to the nature of political life.

What Happened to Theology?

This view of faith and politics is also helpful, I believe, because it shifts the way we carry on our intra-faith conversation in the United States. It strikes me as odd that these faith-centered debates are some of the toughest places around to get a good, old-fashioned theological discussion going. More than once, I have been in forums where liberal and conservative Calvinists go at each other without ever attempting to identify, thoughtfully, the core faith-claims that infuse their politics.

On the evangelical side, it is often assumed that if you cite a Bible verse or if you say "I believe it with all my heart," then you have made a faith-grounded claim about a crucial social issue. However, if you lift up the tablecloth, there's no theology underneath it. By theology, I mean hard, sustained thinking about who God is in our midst and who and what we are called to be in response to God's gracious invitation to faithful community. I mean, as well, reflection not just about the grand political practices of life but the small, everyday ones. When I'm in such political discussions, and no theological reflection is taking place, I want to shout across the table: I know we disagree on school prayer, but what I don't know is how you'd actually argue against separation of church and state on faith grounds. Tell me! I know you agree with Bush on the Middle East, but please, give me a faith-grounded defense of the U.S. military presence in Iraq! Defend torture on Christian grounds! The death penalty—marshal a doctrinal defense of it! I'm then eager to follow up with perhaps the hardest question of all: explain to me how these faith-answers (if you have them) connect with the faith-politics of your everyday interactions with neighbors, children, friends, and so on. It's hard to imagine a question more important to Christians than this. Why are we not demanding that it be asked—as a political question—day in and out?

I must confess that this theological lacuna is not just a problem on the right, however. Although it takes a different form, I find a version of it alive and thriving among my fellow UCC congregants (myself included) who squirm at the mere thought of publicly articulating the religious grounds for their liberal politics. Such arguments aren't hard to muster. Giving a theological defense of liberalism is one of the oldest games going in North America—but

we've been spooked into believing that religiously neutered political discourse is the safest form of public speech about the things that matter most. The problem with this is obvious. It cuts off political visions from their lifeblood and inspiration, which were originally grounded in faith.

Four Reformed Arguments

What would such a Reformed-theological argument for liberal democracy look like? Here's a quick overview—arguments that make for good conversations with both Muslims and evangelicals alike:

1. When I look at the world around me and reflect on the best way to organize our social life, it seems clear that certain processes work better than others. Because I have been shaped in a Reformed, Augustinian tradition that takes seriously the universality of sin—the inevitability that everyone falls prey to the distortions of pride and the destructive power of our acquisitive passions—I think it's best that we have a political decision-making system that spreads power around broadly, making sure no one sinner has too much of it. A system of checks and balances ensures that no privileged set of "corruptions" is left unchallenged. We need systems of tolerance and constraint on religious discourse because no realm is more prone to the excesses of pride and distortions of sin than unbridled religion.

2. Because I have been shaped in a Western faith tradition that views the world and all its creatures as God's beloved creations, I am inclined to see many of the differences I encounter in other people—different cultures, races, tastes, thought-patterns, dreams, delights, and worries—not as threats but as glorious goods, as part of God's grand quotidian, an all-encompassing creation in which multitudinous realities coexist and interrelate. The hope is: the more voices involved in any event, the more wisdom there is to spread around and share—hence the necessity of representational democracy and public education. That human beings (along with the broader created world) should be honored and respected is the core of this worldview—hence the urgency of constitutional protections of basic human rights.

3. Because I believe that God calls the world into forms of faithful living that are structured and bounded, I take very seriously the need to legislate and enforce public laws that bridle sin and enable diversity to flourish. Because I am vividly aware of my obligations to care for others, I heartily support

citizens' duties such as paying taxes and judicial service. Similarly, my strong sense that the epistemic limits of my finitude and my inevitable sinfulness, as well as my recognition of the splendor of created difference, means a sturdy appreciation for the value of open-mindedness and humility as publicly institutionalized values.

4. My tradition also cultivates in me a disposition to hope, an insistent predilection for the future. If time belongs to God, then the future remains the space of new possibility. Each instance—not just of our own personal lives but also our collective political lives—is bordered by an awaiting moment in which God promises to be present and creative,

Let it be a desire for God that enlightens the faith-filled politics of our daily interactions.

to forgive the harms that haunt us by allowing us always to repent and begin again. Because this hope is grounded in an open-eyed assessment of sin and finitude, it is not falsely optimistic but earthy and pragmatic. It prompts me, as a citizen, to accept responsibility for our collective social processes, rejecting cynicism and indifference. I am, alas, called to participate because God is still participating. I am called to speak, as well, because "God is still speaking."

Market-driven Desires

Much of what I say here could be found in the pages of Niebuhr's political and theological writings, Barth's famous radio sessions, or John Calvin's *Commentaries* and *Letters*, the origin of so much of the modern West's political imagination. However, these antecedents don't touch upon a distinctively new challenge to our priorities in communal life—the fevers of consumerism and consumption, the commodification of human desire into the logic of capital, and the problem these pose to public life. This trend seems to me to challenge Calvinist traditions in ways unique to our present day.

The Reformed tradition has long recognized the realm of our interior desires as a place where—to use the old but helpful image—the devil does battle with the Divine. We are called to love God—to desire God's ways, to yearn for the blessed flourishing that God promises us. Faith is the context in which that desire is cultivated. The market also lives by virtue of its power to form and manipulate our desires, to make us want the things that it makes. In the

West, if capitalism is going to grow and prosper, the market needs consumers whose passions are attached to its products. Not all cravings inspired by the market are bad: we want beauty in our lives, we desire comfort and safety and a sense of honest well-being in our homes and community, and it is often only through the market that these goods come to us. But the excesses of the market cannot be underestimated. When covetousness supersedes the fulfillment of our basic needs, then desire becomes corrupted. We must ask ourselves: Is our desire for beauty a faithful impulse if it requires sweatshops in Thailand and self-starving teenagers in our school systems? Is our need for security faithful if it leads to supporting legislation that justifies torture? Is our need for a sense of well-being faithful if it's tied to patterns of addiction that deliver false, quick-fix satisfactions?

I conclude with these comments about market desires because they bring me back to an earlier point. Faith-actions involve our whole being just as politics and citizenship include not just the grand issues but also the practices of the everyday. It may well be that in the years ahead, the most controversial and doggedly exciting realm of political contestation will be the decisions we make as consumers—the forms of life we choose. Here the Reformed tradition has much to teach us. For Calvin, it was finally the glory of God and God's wondrous beauty that compelled him to live in the fullness of that glory and beauty. And it's here right now if we allow ourselves to move forward into lives of faithful service and abundant joy in the communities around us. Let it be a desire for God—a desire that is neither consumeristic nor passive but vibrant and verdantly good—that enlightens the faith-filled politics of our daily interactions.

By imploring our God, our faith, our world, our nation, our neighbor, and our deepest selves—what visions will draw us into the future? What language and hopes will unite us? What cultural particularities will enrich us, and what resilient, stubborn faithfulness will compel us? Are these political questions or faith-based queries? In many of the old models, they are neither, but in a world of American Idols and car bombs and a dazzling, dancing market of consumer desires, it's hard to imagine questions more radical—and more faithful.

Serene Jones, who earned M.Div and Ph.D degrees at Yale, is Titus Street Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School. She is the author of *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) and other books. She is ordained in both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ.

THE INNER PART

by Louis Simpson

When they had won the war
And for the first time in history
Americans were the most important people –

When the leading citizens no longer lived in their shirtsleeves,
And their wives did not scratch in public;
Just when they'd stopped saying "Gosh!" –

When their daughters seemed as sensitive
As the tip of a fly rod,
And their sons were as smooth as a V-8 engine –

Priests, examining the entrails of birds,
Found the heart misplaced, and seeds
As black as death, emitting a strange odor.

Theologies of Democracy in a New Century

By E. J. Dionne, Jr.

Based on the author's keynote address May 3, 2007, at the "Faith and Citizenship: A Public Conversation" conference at Yale Divinity School

There's a word for the subject we are addressing here: intimidating. The issue encompasses not just our own struggles with religious freedom and religion's role in American public life. It also presumably means the role of Islam in world politics and Islam's attitudes toward freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. It means the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the struggles between Hindu nationalist, Muslim, and secular forces in the largest democracy in the world.

It means the conflict between secularism and Islam in Turkey. It means discussing the battles between the Catholic Church and the socialist government in Spain, the complex relationship between Catholicism and government in Poland, and debates in Israel over the formal role of Orthodox Judaism. It means talking about the struggle for religious freedom in China and in many other nations in which religious liberty is curtailed or denied. It means the reemergence of the Orthodox Church as a power in Russia following the fall of communism, the role of liberation theology in Latin America, the influence of the established church in Britain (or lack thereof), and the use of government money to support churches in Germany.

And—God help me—this is just a partial list of the issues before us.

There are great paradoxes in this discussion. We could hold a conference around a single statement by one of my students this semester in a religion-and-politics class I teach at Georgetown. The student wrote, and I paraphrase here: "In the West, we feel obligated to justify our religious goals in secular terms. In many Islamic societies, secular goals must be justified in religious terms."

If we confine ourselves to Christianity, the problem is difficult enough. One of Yale's finest scholars, H. Richard Niebuhr, began a lecture on Religion and

the Democratic Tradition at Berkeley Divinity School in October 1940 with these words: "To speak again of the relations of Christianity and democracy is to venture on ground well-trodden by angels and fools."

Niebuhr explained the desire of so many of us to find links between democracy and our own traditions—in his case and mine, Christianity—this way: "We tend to become so devoted to Christianity that we do not inquire too diligently into its character; we love democracy so dearly that we do not ask it too many questions about its heredity, its religion, its virtues and its vices. We find beauty in both because we love them, as well as love them because they are beautiful. Defensiveness increases confusion in this realm."

As always with both Niebuhr brothers, Richard was acutely aware of the paradoxes and contradictions involved in answering the question he was facing. On the one hand, he saw the danger of pretending that democracy was divinely ordained. "When the divine absolute is acknowledged," he wrote, "all human absolutes appear as dangerous usurpers of the Kingdom of God." He noted that if Lincoln's phrase "of the people, by the people and for the people" were taken literally—as Lincoln himself did not take it, Niebuhr quickly added—"then Christian faith must question it as an adequate definition of government."



Church sisters displaying American flags during an anti-Hitler church ceremony, Toledo, Ohio, 1942 (Arthur Siegel, photographer)

Niebuhr went on: “No people can live in the world of God who live for themselves, who consult only their own desires in making laws, who are their own last court of appeal, their own beginning and their own end.”

Yet in the end, perhaps reflecting the fact that he, like many of us, perceived beauty in both Christianity and democracy, Niebuhr concluded, “Democracy is a gift which is added to men who seek first the Kingdom and its righteousness.”

Here’s how Richard Niebuhr reached that conclusion: “The positive relation between Christian faith and democracy,” he wrote, “is more a moral than intellectual one. Whenever confidence in the rule of God is vital in a society it leads to the limitation of all human power, to increased participation by the people in government, to the willingness to grant liberty to men, and to the political recognition of human equality. Whether or not these are the marks of true democracy, they are the features of the

The task the Niebuhrs and John Courtney Murray took on in the 1940s and 1950s—to develop what might be called a theology of democracy—is once again urgent.

political organization of nations which have been influenced by Jewish and Christian faith.”

Now I agree passionately with Niebuhr on this, and yet I do so bearing in mind his own admonition: that perhaps I do not want to see any conflict between the traditions of Christianity and Judaism and the tradition of democracy because I love both so fervently. Christians and Jews certainly did not always revere democracy as most Christians and Jews do today. At the very time Niebuhr spoke, a significant wing of German Christianity was defending dictatorial rule that led to genocide. My own Catholic Church was far more open to democracy after Vatican II and the papacy of Pope John XXIII than it was before.

It is thus important for us to try to be clear on a number of questions. How successful and how permanent is the reconciliation of Christianity to democracy, toleration and pluralism? Is Niebuhr correct that a belief in a sovereign God necessarily leads to a view that limits the power of the state, including a theocratic state? How would we answer these same questions about the Jewish tradition? And if, indeed, the links between Christianity and Judaism and democracy are strong and durable, what

are we to make of the present and possible future connections between mono democracy and the orientation of the other great monotheistic religion, Islam?

Islam vs. Democracy?

We already know that Islam can be compatible with democracy. Muslims play a vital role in democracies in which they find themselves a minority—India notably, but also the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, among other places. We also know that Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, has enjoyed some real successes in its struggle toward democracy; that Pakistan, with the world’s second largest Muslim population, has had moments of democracy; and of course that Turkey, despite past and current problems, has also made democracy work.

Yet there is a great debate on how successfully Islam can accommodate itself to modernity and democracy as a theoretical and theological matter. True, many once doubted Roman Catholicism’s ability to make such an accommodation, and perhaps the Catholic example is a heartening one. Yet Catholicism itself was greatly affected by the Reformation and the Enlightenment: it had, and continues to have, a dialectical relationship to modernity.

In thinking about this, I went back to an important 1986 essay by Fouad Ajami on what he called the “impossible life” of Muslim liberalism. Ajami wrote:

A whole literature of Moslem apologetics had stressed the compatibility between Islam and democracy, Islam and tolerance, and so on. All of that literature was part of a long intellectual dialogue that these modernists had carried on with Western intellectuals and critics. They were busy debating with the foreigner; they looked past the popular sensibilities of the masses, past the intolerance of religion and the obscurantism of the religious institutions. And thus they were not ready when Islam refused to take a bow, to deliver its exit lines.

It seems to me that the task both Niebuhrs and John Courtney Murray, among others, took on in the 1940s and 1950s—to develop what might be called a theology of democracy—is once again urgent. It remains urgent for Christians and Jews, but it is also vital work for our Muslim sisters and brothers.

Related to this is the work those of us must do in the West to address the question of what religious pluralism looks like when religious diversity explodes within free societies. Will Herberg’s famous book from the 1950s about American plural-

ism, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, would now have to be called *Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Confucian, Baha'i*. And I know I'm leaving some people out even in that ungainly if inclusive title.

How are free societies to manage religious freedom? There are many models, but two very distinctive ones—the American approach and the French approach. Consider the 2003 controversy in France over the ban on Muslim head scarves and other conspicuous religious symbols in the country's public schools. President Jacques Chirac's stand on the issue called forth some startling ironies.

On a weekend in December of 2003, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi condemned the Chirac government for “an extremist decision aimed at preventing the development of Islamic values” in France. Meanwhile, thousands of French Muslims demonstrated in favor of the veil. The Associated Press reported at the time that some Muslim girls in France were thinking of attending Roman Catholic schools so they could continue to wear their head scarves.

Astounding, no? The French government's heavy emphasis on secularism was, of course, rooted deep in the country's history, in a reaction against Catholicism's dominance of the state before the French Revolution and the church's opposition to liberal values into the early part of the twentieth century.

Chirac actually deserved some credit at the time for linking his decision with a necessary call for a renewed “fight against xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism.” He acted in response to both liberal and right-wing fears. French liberals worry about the rise of anti-Semitism and the challenge that head scarves pose to women's rights. The far right has gained ground by exploiting prejudice against Muslim immigrants.

Two Kinds of Secularism

But Chirac's problem was made more difficult because the French version of secularism is different from its American variant. The American approach provides more room for settling conflicts of the sort France and others among our European friends now confront. One does not have to be a chauvinist to see certain advantages to the American approach.

Both France and the United States see their respective governments as “secular” in the sense that they do not sponsor any particular faith. But as the historian Wilfred McClay has noted, there are at least two kinds of secularism. One is largely “negative,” aimed at protecting religion from government establishment and interference. The other sees sec-

ularism as “an alternative faith” that “supersedes the tragic blindness and destructive irrationalities of the historical religions.” People are free to act on their religious beliefs in private, McClay has written, “as long as they do not trouble the rest of us with them, or bestir the proverbial horses.”

One of the central facts about the U.S. since the 1960s has been the disestablishment of white Protestantism as one of the central organizing forces of American moral and cultural life.

McClay is critical of this view and prefers the “negative” approach because it limits the government's claims and respects religion's contribution to the public realm. On the whole, the United States has operated within this limited framework, while French secularism has been more aggressive in pushing religion to the margins of public life.

The difference between the approaches has already played itself out on the schools issue. In 1995 the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines that drew a distinction between the rights of individual public school students and the duty of teachers and school administrators. Students were free to wear religious garb and symbols, to pray voluntarily on school grounds, and to read the Bible or other holy books at study halls. But school officials had the duty not to endorse any particular religious doctrine, nor could they coerce students into participating in any religious activity. The balance, President Bill Clinton said at the time, demonstrated that the Constitution “does not require children to leave their religion at the schoolhouse door.”

The guidelines became a bit more ambiguous after the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1997, but the idea behind them is still right. Government institutions should not sponsor religion but must respect the consciences of individuals who operate within them. Later guidelines protected the rights of religious federal employees.

The American tradition cannot simply be transposed to France or other nations. And before Americans crow, we should reflect on the expressions of religious bigotry in our own history. But the conflicts that confronted Chirac and face other Western nations suggest that America's limited form of secularism may well, as McClay has written, provide “an essential basis for peaceful coexistence in a religiously pluralistic society.” The more limited Ameri-

can secularism is in fact rooted in a basic respect for religious traditions and not in hostility to religion.

These discussions put heavy stress on individual rights. But where does community fit in here, the idea of common bonds and common duties? What can we say about the requirement described in the Christian tradition as an obligation to “the least among us,” and in the Jewish tradition as *tzedakkah*, the obligation to act charitably toward others, and *tikkun olam*, the obligation to repair and improve the world around us?

The quest for community, I believe, is at the bottom of so much of the recent commotion about religion’s role in the public life of our country. One of the central facts about the United States since the 1960s has been the disestablishment of white Protestantism as one of the central organizing forces of American moral and cultural life. The election of John F. Kennedy marked the full entry of Roman Catholics into the mainstream of American civic life. The civil rights movement sought to right historic wrongs done to African Americans. The 1960s saw the sweeping away of many long-standing social and economic barriers against Jews, and new movements to defend the rights of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean.

The new discourse about religion in public life is more inclusive, in theory at least, and far more open. But with the decline of the cultural influence of white Protestantism came the loss of a civic glue that the old Protestant values provided.

The Waning of The Religious Right?

I will not pretend here to provide a magical recipe for a new civic glue. I do think that some of its ingredients can be found in the writings of the Niebuhrs, Philip Selzick, Robert Bellah, Michael Walzer, Bill Galston, Amitai Etzioni, Jim Wallis, and Bryan Hehir—and, indeed, in the theologies of justice developed in the civil rights movement and in African American churches, beginning but not ending with Martin Luther King, Jr.; in the rich tradition of Catholic social thought; in aspects of the Protestant Social Gospel, though with the important corrections offered by Reinhold Niebuhr; and in the new enthusiasm within modern evangelical Protestantism for environmental stewardship and an engagement with the poor.

There has never been a better moment for a new religious conversation, especially one organized around the theme of community. We meet at a moment when the religious winds are changing. The future of religious engagement with American public

life will not, I believe, be defined by the events of the recent past. Beginning in the late 1970s, much of the public discourse assumed that religion lives on the right, an assumption that shaped how religion was covered in the mass media. Once, the media had paid much attention to a broad range of religious figures—from Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth to John Courtney Murray, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Starting in the late 1970s, the focus of interest narrowed. To be sure, Pope John Paul II got his share of attention. But in the United States, the attention lavished on Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and later James Dobson suggested that to be religious was to cling to a rather narrow set of social and political views. The public voice of religion, as reflected in the supposedly liberal mass media, was deeply inflected with a particular brand of southern, conservative evangelicalism.

But in the new millennium, new religious voices are rising to challenge stereotypical views of religious faith. I speak here not only of Wallis, Amy Sullivan, Bob Edgar, and others on the side of religious progressivism. There is also Rick Warren, a religious and political conservative who nonetheless insists that if Christians do not care about the poorest among them in the world, they are not being true to their faith. There is Rich Cizik, a loyal conservative official of the National Association of Evangelicals, who has fought tough internal battles to stand up for the idea that a concern for life must entail a concern for the stewardship of the Earth and an engagement with the problem of global warming. There is Bono, who once said he could be considered a man of the cloth only if the cloth were leather. He, too, challenged Christians to stand up for the poor.

And religious liberals who had spent much time reacting to the Religious Right in the 1980s—sometimes by arguing against religious engagement in politics altogether—found their voices as people of faith insisting on a different interpretation of their traditions and of the scriptures, including the insistence that whatever else one might try to make of Jesus’ politics, it is highly unlikely that he would put cuts in capital gains taxes and the repeal of inheritance taxes at the top of his political agenda.

The era of the Religious Right is over. Its collapse is part of a larger decline of a certain style of ideological conservatism that reached high points in 1980 and 1994 and collapsed in 2006. The end of the Religious Right does not signal a decline in evangelical Christianity. On the contrary, it is a sign of a new reformation among Christians—Warren

and Cizik are representative figures—who are trying to disentangle their great movement from a political machine. This historic change will require liberals and conservatives alike to abandon their sometimes narrow views of who evangelicals are and what they believe. And it will encourage conservative evangelicals to reopen lines of communication with more progressive Christians, and with others on the center and left of politics.

Dreams and Paradoxes

If we're honest, we will always see the paradoxes and ironies of religion's relationship to public life. Religion can create community, and it can divide communities. It can lead to searing self-criticism, and it can promote a pompous self-satisfaction. It can encourage dissent and conformity, generosity and narrow-mindedness. Religion's finest hours have been the times when intense belief led to social transformations, yet some of its darkest days have entailed the translation of intense belief into the ruthless imposition of orthodoxy.

But the history of the United States, at least, despite our many outbreaks of prejudice, nativism and self-congratulation, is in large part a history of religion's role as a prod to social justice, inclusion, and national self-criticism.

I'd like to close with two views of religion's public role suggesting that at its best, it is prophetic and challenging, often dangerous to the powers-that-be and friendly to those who are oppressed and heavily burdened.

The first is from Michael Walzer's fine book *Exodus and Revolution*. Walzer argues that the Exodus story has provided Western thought with one of its central themes, of "oppression" and "deliverance," of the idea that "the door of hope" always remains open. "We still believe," Walzer writes,

or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught . . . about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form: — First, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt.
— Second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land.
— And third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. There is no way to get from here to there without joining together and marching.

And listen to the historian Richard Wightman Fox, reflecting on the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and the historian Christopher Lasch. Both, Fox said, understood that

religion can be seen both as a democratic social power—a capacity to build community—and as a tragic perspective that acknowledges the perennial failing of human beings to make community endure. ... Religion allows people to grapple with the human mysteries that neither science nor politics can address. But it also provides a force that science and politics can call on in their effort to understand and transform the social world.

Fox, I believe, explains why we are destined to visit, over and over, the relationship between religion and our aspirations to pluralism, freedom, justice, and democracy. Only by doing so will we be able to respect the serious moral commitments of believers and unbelievers alike. Only by doing so will we preserve free expression and religious liberty. And only by doing so will we create the "beloved community" that was Martin Luther King's dream, and remains our aspiration.

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SURVEY

Theologian-in-Chief?

Some 60 percent of Americans believe a presidential candidate should be a religious person, according to a recent national poll.

The other 40 percent do not.

The survey also reported that 48 percent say their own religious faith always or sometimes guides their political views. An equal percentage say their own faith seldom or never guides their views.

Source: The Sacred Heart University Polling Institute, which conducted 958 interviews nationwide in May 2007. The sample carries a 3 percent margin of error.

From Citizens to Ambassadors: Pondering Community in a Global Age

By Heidi Hadsell

Within and beyond Christianity in the United States today, the meaning of citizenship is deeply contested territory. Christians do not agree about what citizenship means, and the argument is essentially a moral one. For a significant number of American Christians, to be a citizen is to be a loyal patriot, along the lines of “my country, right or wrong.”

This stance is viewed as a Christian duty in a country in which God is uniquely present. Other American Christians, confronted by what they perceive to be an imperial and unilateral nation, wonder how to be, or whether it is possible to be, coherently Christian and a proud citizen of the United States at the same time.

Meanwhile, the wider context of citizenship has changed dramatically, and it continues to change. Our world is now inexorably global. This global reality, this global belonging, inevitably and sometimes helpfully reshapes our identities as citizens.

To these factors, add immigration in unprecedented numbers, the growing ranks of dual citizens, the fight against terrorism and its impact on definitions of “them” and “us,” the growing economic disparities within the citizenry of this country—all these trends give us a rich mix to think about when we turn our attention to citizenship.

Once Again, Who is My Neighbor?

Many if not most of the pressing ethical questions of the day—immigration, environmental crisis, hunger, nuclear arms, terrorism—are questions closely connected to global integration. They cannot be adequately addressed within national boundaries. Although often experienced as national questions, they cannot be reasoned about morally within the geographical boundaries of nation-states only. Our conversation partners are also inevitably international, and they come to the conversation with their own assumptions, interests, religions, and cultures.

Globalization, the unprecedented international integration and interdependence that we see everywhere, is helping reshape our understanding of citizenship.

Globalization involves all corners of the globe—never equally, of course, but rather according to differences in political and military power and economic prowess, both within countries and between them. Globalization does not mean an end to the international pecking order. Rather, the ability to take advantage of the dynamics of globalization still depend largely on where one’s nation is in the pecking order, and where one is within the nation. Practically speaking, it means that even while wealthy and many middle-income people from the North may denounce the unjust and dehumanizing effects of globalization on others around the world, most of them are enjoying much of the best that it has to offer.

With these rapidly changing global realities, we are required to ask the question again: Who is my neighbor? Does this global reality, this dawning consciousness of belonging to a “global village,” radically challenge my understanding of neighbor—so that I now understand my neighbor to be not just the person across the street but across the world? Do these people around the world have claims on me that are the claims of a neighbor? Must I care about his welfare, her hunger, the life possibilities for their children in a sustained and significant way, and thus care too for our common stewardship of the neighborhood in which we live?¹

If I live my citizenship, as I must, in the light of the larger world, my national belonging still persists. But it is inevitably relativized. I now begin to think about public policy, for example, not just in terms of its impact on me, or on varieties of groups and regions within the United States, but also its impact on people across the globe whom I will never encounter, and about the globe itself, which sustains and connects us all.

In a radically unequal and suffering world, in a country as rich and powerful as the United States,

It's not surprising that people react by falling back on alternative identities, not only as citizens of nation-states but as members of peoples or tribes.

this means understanding and critiquing the actions of one's own nation, not simply according to national well-being, or national self-interest, but according to their impact on others around the globe. Recognizing this reality, friends from places as disparate as Lebanon and Indonesia observe, half in jest, that they too should have a vote in American elections.

At the end of the day, of course, few can truly live as global citizens, and they usually belong to the tribe we know as the international jet set. For the rest of us, a global sense of responsibility is possible but hard to live in a daily way, hard to feel comfortable and at home in.

So it's not surprising that people react by falling back on alternative identities, not only as citizens of nation-states but as members of peoples or tribes, which mark belonging through language, history, culture, ethnicity, and so forth. These are identities rooted not in civic citizenship but rather in a sense of belonging to an in-group, the kind that keeps itself together by keeping everyone else out. It is as if people say to themselves, I am exhausted and overwhelmed with thinking about global realities, so I am withdrawing into a world I understand and over which I have some control, where I know who I am and where I belong. This is my tribe.

In this movement toward such identities (and the identity politics that go with them), the result is the opposite of national citizenship. Rather, national citizenship is checked by the claims of belonging to a smaller collectivity. The answer to "Who is my neighbor?" differs also. In fact the answer is very much like that of folks whom Jesus challenged a long time ago: my neighbor is the one who looks

and thinks as much as possible like me, and does so in a language I speak and in symbols and rituals I understand. My neighbor is he or she who stands with me against those who are not like us.

Along with this sort of tribalism often goes a simultaneous increase in moral certainty and a shrinking of the moral imagination, the scope or sense of obligation and responsibility. What is left is a far cry from Paul's ideal description of Christian belonging that says there is no Greek, no Jew, no slave, nor free. From the tribal perspective, all we have are Greeks and Jews and slaves and free. The connections between us evaporate, and with them goes any notion of the common good. Citizenship, which is built precisely on the notion that fellow citizens may be radically different in every way yet equal before the law, disappears altogether.²

Citizenship and Safety

One can't talk about citizenship in the United States today without noting the contested redefinition of the meaning of citizenship since 9/11. I mean both the shifting rights and roles of citizenship codified in measures like the Patriot Act, and the more elusive internalization of a shifting sense of what it means to be a citizen. The citizens in the United States are surrendering rights that represent the results of hard-fought battles won over many, many decades, and that form part of the building blocks of democracy. We are agreeing to trade in some of these rights and responsibilities (the right to privacy, for example) in exchange for security and safety against an ill-defined and ever-changing threat of terrorism.

The boundaries of U.S. citizenship and non-citizenship are shifting accordingly. Non-citizen "enemy combatants" are currently denied the rights of due process, protected by the American Constitution, which heretofore were extended to all within the geographical boundaries of the United States. In this and other less dramatic ways, divisions between citizens and non-citizens in the United States are growing. The change hits home. A small example: Recently, two American citizens related to Hartford Seminary were entering the United States after a trip to a meeting abroad. One, whose name is Jane, went quickly through immigration; the other, Saleem, was held for several hours of questioning.

There are many moral questions here to think about: Can citizens sit by and enjoy our rights while others within the country and in legal never-never lands like Guantanamo Bay are denied their rights? Does not the fact that others are being denied their rights diminish the rights of all of us? Does not

the very meaning of citizenship change when the democracy to which it is related is diminished? Is not this nation by definition the country of the stranger?³

There is nothing new about our drive for safety. It is part of the human condition, as old as humanity itself. Though we want to be as safe as possible, the long history of Christian thought teaches us that, alas, safety and permanence are always illusory, no matter how we long for them and how hard we work for them, how much we give up for them. Precisely because the human drive for safety is so strong, we do well to be suspicious of the lengths to which we are willing to go in order to feel secure and attend carefully to the ways in which the drive for security shapes and misshapes human community. History teaches us the often terrible price we pay when we rush to surrender the rights of others and even our own rights in order to ensure our security.⁴

An old Brazilian joke comes to mind—about the military dictator in the 1960s who, referring to the military's fight for internal security against dissidents, declared in his inaugural address, "When I became president we were on the edge of the abyss, and then we took a giant step forward."

So I worry about the changing meaning of citizenship in this "age of terrorism"—what it does to our sense of the common good and what abyss we are stepping into. And frankly I often worry as much about our rush to security as I do about terrorism itself.

Citizen As Consumer

Almost as alarming, and perhaps more insidious as a challenge to citizenship in our era, is our individual and collective inclination to trade the identity of citizen for the identity of consumer. In the United States today, consumerism is a primary way of belonging. I would venture to say that often the major way an individual participates in the society today is by buying things. This fact is echoed and reinforced by our political leadership. The act of consumption is often the only act asked of us as citizens. Witness the number of times since 9/11 that Americans have been urged by our leaders to show our patriotism through consuming. Our politicians begin to look like commodities themselves in a political process swamped by seemingly unlimited supplies of money from lobbyists representing private interests.

Even the idea of "freedom," so often invoked with stirring effect, is laden with consumer connotations. The "freedom" to pursue the "American way of life" has come to mean almost exclusively a material way of life—green lawns, big cars, strip

malls, and the like, and the freedom to pursue one's own individual (economic) interests. Seldom are appeals made to our political rights when the concept of freedom is invoked. Implicitly, we accept the tradeoff, where one basically opts out of exercising one's political duties and rights as citizen, in return for occasional and symbolic political participation and the right to consume material goods.

We all participate as consumers, but of course we consume very differently. This is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of the distribution of income, a fact Americans have not internalized at all.⁵ At least 30 million people—a whole country within a country, people with the title of

Individualism becomes the right to make as much money as possible and to do with it whatever one wants, and "we" the citizens come to fear and hate the non-citizen.

citizen—live below the poverty line in this nation. They have little to consume, little in terms of basic preparation—education, for instance, or a sense of belonging—for exercising rights of citizenship. They appear out of the equation altogether—excluded, "excluidos" as they are called in Latin America. The simple title of citizen means little until people know how to exercise their citizenship, and have the means to do so, and can look to the government for protection.

The Christian gospel speaks loudly and clearly on the subject of wealth and distribution. Excessive materialism is an insidious form of idolatry to which we sacrifice not only our right relationship with God, but also human community, even our own humanity. As I understand the Jubilee, it is an idea required not only for social justice or charity, but precisely because the Hebrew people realized that, beyond a certain limit, material inequality renders human community and relationships untenable.

What many of the most privileged and powerful among us ignore is how the common core of national values has been hollowed out, emptied, perverted. Patriotism becomes blind support of whatever the government does, individualism becomes the right to make as much money as possible and to do with it whatever one wants, and "we" the citizens come to fear and hate the non-citizen.

So here we are—in a global context, torn between a somewhat amorphous global sense of responsibility and the more narrowly constructed identities that subvert an imaginative calling to citizenship. At the



A "flying nun" at Washington National Airport after a flight lesson, 1943 (Ann Rosener, photographer)

same time we fear for our safety and are addicted to consumerism, both of which make us almost eager to trade in the rights of citizenship for their sake.

Theologically our struggle is with our own deepest human tendencies, which scripture pointedly reflects upon: idolatry, insecurity, hubris, the drive to dominate and even annihilate the other. Many of the dynamics that undermine the meaning of citizenship are of our own making.

And by now we are asking: what can we do?

Some Christians, in fact many, have already decided what to do. They choose moral certitude, national supremacy, and patriotism as shields against uncertainty. They lay the blame for insecurity on our internal national diversity, or on our external enemies, real and imagined. What might be the road ahead for the rest of us?

Not long ago I spent a week in Syria with a group from Hartford Seminary. Our group was composed of Muslims and Christians, and we were hosted by Muslims and Christians in Syria. It was a remarkable visit. The final evening I was there, it being Ramadan, we were invited to an Iftar—a breaking of the fast—in our honor at the home of a Muslim leader in Damascus, who had gathered on his rooftop for the occasion a talented, articulate, and experienced group of Muslim religious and intellectual leaders. After dinner, interspersed with wonderful Sufi music, came the inevitable round of speeches. Finally, a well-respected elder intellectual of Islamic history stood and spoke in English. Appropriately enough, he evoked our common memory of the apostle Paul and, using Pauline language, encouraged us all to be ambassadors for peace.

As he spoke I realized I had found the civic image that I have been looking for. Ambassadors—those citizens who, grounded in one civic community, find the common ground between it and others. Ambassadors—who stand in one place, one religious or civic tradition, yet build bridges, summoning the best that their own tradition has to offer to the other in order to straddle the divide, and discerning the best that the other has to offer. Ambassadors—who help to imagine, to articulate, to bring into existence the common good, and who serve that common good.

My hope is that as Christians and as citizens we will muster the capacity to exercise this ancient art.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent argument for the kind of global perspective I have described, see Martha Nussbaum's essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" in *For Love of Country?* edited by Martha Nussbaum (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
- 2 Jean Bethke Elshtain puts it this way: "To the extent that citizens begin to re-tribalize into ethnic or other 'fixed identity' groups, democracy falters. Any possibility for human dialogue, for democratic communication and commonality, vanishes as so much froth on the polluted sea of phony equality. Difference becomes more and more exclusivist. If you are black and I am white, by definition I do not and cannot 'get it.' There is no way that we can negotiate the space between our differences." Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p. 74.
- 3 I have written about some of these questions in my chapter "Internal Security and Civil Liberties: Moral Dilemmas and Debates" in *September 11: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences*, edited by Ian Markham and Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002).
- 4 Theologians who experienced World War II, such as Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr, continue to have very relevant perspectives and experience on this question of our human drive for safety and the price human communities pay for it.
- 5 See, for example, "US Led a Resurgence Last Year Among Millionaires World-Wide," Robert Frank, *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2004. In this article Frank reports, that "the wealthiest 1% in the U.S. control more than a third of the nation's wealth—the starkest such concentration among industrialized countries." Citing the work of the NYU economist Edward H. Wolff, Frank also reports, "The wealthiest 5% controlled 59.2% of the nation's wealth in 2001, little changed from the 60.3% in 1995."

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In Search of Christian America

By Harry S. Stout

Adapted from a talk given at Yale Divinity School on Feb. 12, 2007, during the “Voices & Votes” conference, organized by the Yale Forum on Faith & Politics, a student group based at the Divinity School.

How do we understand and define America today? There are those who would define America as a secular republic. Others would define America as a Christian republic. Or they say, well, it is secular, but it should be Christian and that’s what we’re striving to achieve. Both have a lot of resonance in our society today.

All I want to add to the conversation is to say these debates today are hardly new to American history. It’s no exaggeration to say the debate about whether America is or should be a Christian nation goes to the heart of the question: What does it mean to most Americans to be an American?

The idea of Christian America came to me personally quite early: I was brought up in a fundamentalist household in Philadelphia and sent to a fundamentalist school. I think I would use those terms now to describe it. We had to memorize a chapter of the Bible every week, we were told that it would be sinful to vote for John Kennedy because he answered to the Pope, and we can’t trust Catholics, let alone atheists, and that America was very much a Christian republic or ought to be. This was the unquestioned orthodoxy in my household.

Then I went off to a Christian college—Calvin College, in Grand Rapids, Michigan—and I had a new professor there named George Marsden. And he in no uncertain terms proceeded to disabuse me of the notion that it’s appropriate even to talk about Christian America. Such things bordered on idolatry rather than truth, he said.

On two fronts he disabused me of the idea of a Christian America. He did this first theologically, arguing that the idea of a covenanted society, God covenanting with nation-states as well as with individuals, modeled on ancient Israel as kind of the template for what such a Christian society would look like, simply didn’t bear scrutiny. God’s covenanting with nations stopped with Christ and an-

cient Israel; there was subsequently no such thing as nation-states enjoying a peculiar—maybe the word is exceptional—relationship with God that set them apart from all other nations and imposed on them a responsibility to bring unique redemption to the world in the same way that ancient Judaism brought Christ to the world. He said that’s nonsense; these things simply don’t exist. That was an eye-opener to me.

The other dimension, besides the theological, was the constitutional. Marsden said America as a nation-state in fact did not begin in 1630; it began in 1776 and assumed constitutional shape in 1787, when church and state were explicitly separated. This was, indeed, the genius of the Constitution—this radical idea of the separation of church and state, liberty of conscience without restraint.

Now, in the colonial period, there were many right here in New England who simply couldn’t abide the idea that you could have a functioning republic without some kind of established religion, without some kind of religious test to ensure its virtue. Connecticut and Massachusetts, notably, held out and did not disestablish the Congregational Church until the early decades of the 1800s.

But other states abandoned the idea of a state church very quickly, so that in constitutional terms, according to Marsden, the very idea of creating a Christian nation-state here, or claiming the founders were somehow closet Christians and closet evangelicals who wanted to create a Christian republic, was patently nonsense.

So, I grew up being taught that there was such a thing as a Christian America. Went to college and learned that such an idea is idolatry. I more or less stuck with that second camp. Then I went to graduate school, a secular university, and again revisited the question of a Christian nation, this time as a historian who wanted to understand how this idea originated, this notion that God covenants with nations even now on terms not dissimilar to the terms that governed God's relationship with ancient Israel in what was essentially a theocracy.

The Puritans were a people gripped by the power of ideas. Theirs would be the first really ideologically driven colonization effort of the New World.

The search brought me back to the beginnings—to New England, which was the last region to disestablish religion, and to a group known as the Puritans. If you take my survey class, we'll spend a whole hour talking about the Puritans. Here I'll simply say that when we look at the English settlement in North America we find this group in New England who comes for motives very different from those of the colonies to the south, with people who are very different from the other colonists to the south. Most colonial experiences, prior to the Puritans, were primarily driven by economics. They were virtually all-male in settlement, arriving with a boom-or-bust mentality. But the Puritans were a people gripped by the power of ideas. Theirs would be the first really ideologically driven colonization effort in the New World. It represents the first folk migration to the New World. Women and children are integral to the whole experiment. They're here to create a permanent settlement.

What kind of settlement? First governor John Winthrop spells it out in words that continue to refrain in American history. He gets the colonists under way with seven ships going over to the New World. He preaches a sermon on the lead ship, the *Arabella*, after they get past the halfway point, so there can be no swimming back. And he says, You might wonder why we're on this voyage. This is not about making money, it's not about dispersing inland and everyone going their own way looking for their own fortune. It's something very different. He said, We're coming over to this New World to establish a model society. At the core of this model society will be the idea of a covenant.

Covenant terminology was hardly original to John Winthrop and the Puritans. It's part of the stock

of Christian rhetoric. But now it had an unfamiliar twist, unique for North America. That twist was that God not only saves individuals through what the Puritans called the covenant of grace, based on the sacrificial atonement of Christ and other familiar Reformation terminology, but God also establishes covenants with nations or with peoples in which the terms and the meaning are going to be very similar to what ancient Israel enjoyed. That's why the Puritans could call their society a new Israel, and that's what they were here to create, under the aegis of a Christian dispensation, rather than a Jewish dispensation, a national covenant.

Now note that national covenants are different from the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is forever. You're incorporated and grafted into it and it's forever: eternal damnation or eternal salvation. National covenants are different. National covenants are contingent. They succeed only so long as you honor the terms of the covenant. The minute you cease to observe those terms, God can give you your Babylon, just as He gave Israel its Babylon for refusing to honor the terms of the covenant.

The Whole World Is Watching

This becomes an extraordinarily powerful metaphor. But not only a metaphor. It is broadened to encompass the very laws of New England. Then in famous terms that reverberate in high school civics texts down to the present, in presidential rhetoric and oratory, Winthrop makes that ringing allusion to words in Matthew when he says: you're going to be a city upon a hill. The eyes of the world are going to look upon you because we're doing something unique. We're creating a covenantal society. We're going on public record to say we aren't like other nation-states. We're going on record as a new Israel. And if we succeed in this, the world will want to emulate us. They won't be able to resist.

Consider the chutzpa of this guy. He's got seven little boats, about eleven hundred people, and he's convinced that the whole world will be watching this new city on a hill. And he thinks, If we succeed in this covenant, God is going to use us as His redemptive agent in the same way that He used ancient Israel as His redemptive agent in producing Christ. And this new Israel will hold forth, if it honors the terms of the covenant, until Christ's second coming.

This was a novel idea, and it didn't die in colonial New England. It survives through the colonial period and into the early Republic. It's a powerful idea. It promises you uniqueness. Scholars who aren't necessarily scholars of Puritanism or colonial America have long recognized what they call the doctrine of

American exceptionalism—that we aren't like the other nations of the world, and we don't have to be held to the same standards or the same accounts because we're on a mission, a redemptive mission in some of the same ways that ancient Israel was.

And being God's special people doesn't mean happy people. This is a jealous God who will punish you if you don't honor the covenant. This God can come down very hard on you. So the Puritans tended to read the signs of the times for how well they were observing the covenant. If there were droughts, pestilence, storms, wars with Indians,

For the school of thought called the “Christian America” school, religion must be both a matter of private conscience and public policy; the two can't be separated.

these were signs that God is displeased and you need to reform. If you repent and reform, because you're in this special relationship, God will withdraw these “loving reprieves” and restore you to your privileged place. For the Puritans, all was contingent on the covenant.

Fast-forward to the Revolution, the new order of the ages. Here we see the creation of the republic, the separation of church and state. Yet for many Calvinists with Puritan origins, the conclusion they draw is that the Constitution and the new republic do not eliminate American exceptionalism. It's just that God, as a blessing to New England, is going to graft the other states into this covenanted status so that this national covenant is still binding.

So we see two different rhetorics at work in American history. For a period after the Revolution, the two could coexist. And at many points in American history they can coexist. But inevitably there were flashpoints, moments of contest.

For many Americans that first great contest came in the War of 1812, which was hotly disputed in New England and the North. They called it Mr. Madison's war, created by stubborn cavaliers who were looking for wars of imperialism and aggrandizement. There was a great protest by New England clergy against this. Supporters of the war said, The president of the United States has authorized this war, and it's your constitutional duty as an American citizen to honor that president and honor that war. But these clergy in New England said, Nonsense—that's not our ultimate allegiance. Our ultimate allegiance is the covenant.

These opponents of the War of 1812 came to see that a great mistake had been made when the Constitution was drafted, excluding God, not invoking God. By 1812 there was an outcry of disillusionment with the Constitution and a desire to add an amendment that would explicitly name America as a Christian nation to make up for this oversight.

Yet Jefferson and Madison were saying, This was no oversight. It's exactly what we had in mind for this new republic, the separation of church and state. So it's easy to see how tensions would emerge from the very start of the republic between those who envision a Christian republic and those who explicitly disavow that idea and were very deliberate in their exclusion of God, any god, any faith's god, from the language and terminology of the Constitution.

For the most part, these tensions, not to say contradictions, never erupted in violent upheaval, but they did divide American society in profound ways that persist down to the present. For the school of thought called the “Christian America” school, a major proposition was that religion must be both a matter of private conscience and public policy; the two can't be separated. They argued that only Christians should be elected to public office; there should be an actual religious test. There should be Christian legislatures, Christian legislators creating a Christian republic that harkens back to 1630 and to the covenant.

Explicitly excluded, according to this school, were atheists and deists—that is to say, the framers of the Constitution, or many of them. Such habitually irreligious people, one minister declared, were “unfit for human society.” They were considered national enemies. Atheists were said to depersonalize the cosmos and could not be tolerated in a Christian America.

Civil War, Religious War

This strain of debate still lies very much at the center of questions of American identity. It doesn't disappear. I encountered it in my early work with the Puritans. I encountered it again in the American Revolution, in the aftermath of the Revolution, in what is sometimes called the Second Revolution in the War of 1812, and then again when I looked at the role religion played in the Civil War.

There, I was astounded to see once again, at the center of many debates, especially once the war erupted between North and South, the idea of a Christian America. This is something that a lot of Civil War historians, Civil War buffs, never saw because they hadn't read the Puritans, they didn't realize the long history that went into this thinking,

and so they tended to dismiss the rhetoric. But as I started looking at the newspapers and speeches of the time, I saw the laments again for Christian America. And the first and loudest voices were the Confederates.

The Confederates seceded from the Union and drafted their own constitution, which in many ways resembled the federal constitution, with two exceptions: one is, it guaranteed the foul institution of slavery in perpetuity. But the other thing it did was declare its Christian identity. In the Confederate constitution they deliberately insert the phrase, “invoking the favor and guidance of almighty God.” The Confederate national motto, from the Latin, means: “with God as our defender.”

God in the Details

The Confederacy reeks with the rhetoric of a Christian republic, and they continually throw it in the face of the North. Especially in the early days, when they had victories, they said, See, we’re blessed with our victories because we’re a Christian state, and we have gone on record as such. We have a unique covenant with God. They granted legitimacy to the Puritans, saying the Confederates were the real heirs of the Puritans, carrying the covenant forward and receiving God’s blessing. The North, they said, is filled with degenerates—with deists, Mormons, free thinkers, free-love advocates. That’s the North—atheistic. They don’t even mention God in their Constitution.

This really rankled northern Republicans because they bought into the same theology. Northern Republicans said, The Confederates are absolutely wrong to think they’re a Christian republic; they’re an abomination, they’re rebels, they are the enemies of God’s covenant, but they’re right about one thing—we didn’t invoke God in our Constitution. So, there’s much agitation in the North, among Republicans, to add a constitutional amendment that would explicitly invoke God. By 1862 or 1863 the push intensified to out-Christian the Confederacy. There was an effort to amend the Constitution to invoke God, Jesus Christ as savior, and the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures. These were to be part of our national creed.

But President Lincoln didn’t agree with that. Lincoln embraced separation of church and state along the model of the framers of the Constitution. Lincoln’s scripture was not the Puritans’ covenant. His scripture was the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And little did he know that he would contribute the other two of the nation’s four great scriptures of an American civil religion: the

Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural.

But the pressure was intense from ministers throughout the Northeast and New England particularly. Finally, Lincoln says, Okay, I’m going to do two things: we’re going to have fast days, and I will

Lincoln’s scripture was not the Puritans’ covenant. His scripture was the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

invoke God to bless these fasts. The South rightly pointed out that they had two times as many fasts as the North. Jefferson Davis had proclaimed eight fasts, Lincoln only two. So Lincoln adds this—a national motto. And the national motto will be “In God we trust.” And it will be emblazoned on the nation’s coinage. What better way to fuse Christianity and the Republic than to put that motto on the nation’s coinage?

There were voices of bitter dissent in the North. It’s easy to forget that even in the second presidential election in 1864, something over 40 percent of northern Americans voted Democratic. They’re the forgotten northerners. They don’t survive in the myths of the era—it’s all Lincoln. But the Democrats were the only sustained voice saying, “This is nonsense, there is no such thing as a Christian republic. These fast days are an abomination. The worst thing we can imagine is to have a constitution invoking God because that’s not the America we bought into.” They shouted loudly, with virtual hatred for Lincoln and the Republicans, but the Republicans won the day, though not without ongoing bitterness.

After the Battle of Bull Run, which of course was a decisive victory for the Confederacy, northern ministers became more convinced than ever that the reason they lost that battle was (a) because it was fought on the sabbath and (b) because they didn’t have God written into their Constitution. For these people, the reason for the defeat at Bull Run was not tactics or politics but bad philosophy.

Hartford’s famous minister Horace Bushnell delivered an address after the defeat at Bull Run, pointing out that America’s idea of freedom and what America stands for is not grounded in Lockean and Jeffersonian epistemology or in the naturalistic premises of the Declaration of Independence, but in the Puritans. He’s very explicit in this. This is the true America. Without mentioning Lincoln by name, Bushnell complained, “Our statesmen or

politicians, not being generally religious men, take up with difficulty conceptions of government or the foundations of government that suppose the higher rule of God. Our political theories never gave us a real nationality but only a co-partnership. And the armed treason is only the consummated result of our speculations. When nothing exists but a consent, what can be needed to end it but a dissent?" Interesting question.

For Bushnell, this clearly meant that the triumph of the American republic could only happen if and when the Americans move beyond these abstract Jeffersonian principles that all men are created equal, that the people are sovereign, that there should be no laws regarding the establishment of religion. Only after these ideas are reined in and subordinated to America's true providential inception in 1630 on board the *Arabella* with Governor Winthrop will the Union start winning battles.

And so the debate and the tensions live on.

As I look at the debates in the present, it's very interesting to note that the strongest centers for the idea of a Christian America haven't changed. They're the South and the Republican party. That's where the voices are strongest. And the largest voices of dissent in 2007, no less than 1862, are the Democrats and the Democratic Party.

The lesson to be taken from this? Myths die hard, and, for many Americans, the one truly intolerable, unacceptable notion even now is that America is one more profane nation in the wilderness of this world.

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OUR GENERATION by Carl Dennis

Whatever they say about us, they have to agree
We managed to bridge the gap between
Those who arrived before us and those who've followed.
We learned enough at the schools available
To fill the entry-level positions at the extant sawmills
Our elders managed, at banks, freight yards, and hospitals,
Then worked our way up to positions of trust.
There we were, down on the shop floor
Or up in the manager's office, or outside the office
On scaffolds, washing the windows.
Did we work with joy? With no less joy
Than people felt in the generations before us.
And on weekends and weekday evenings
We did our best to pursue the happiness
Our founders encouraged us to pursue,
And with equal gusto. Whatever they say about us
They can't deny that we filled the concert halls,
Movie houses, malls, and late-night restaurants.
We took our bows on stage or waited on tables

Or manned the refreshment booths to earn a little extra
For the things we wanted, the very things
Pursued by the generations before us
And likely to be pursued by generations to come:
Children and lawns and cars and beach towels.
And now and then we stood back to admire
The colorful spectacle, the endless variety,
As others before us admired it, and then returned
To fill our picnic baskets, drive to the park,
And use the baseball diamonds just as their makers
Intended they should be used. And if we too
Crowded into the square to cheer the officials
Who proclaimed our country as fine in fact
As it is in theory, a few of us, confined to a side street,
Carried signs declaring a truth less fanciful.
A few unheeded, it's true, but no more unheeded
Than a similar few in generations before us
Who hoped that the truth in generations to come,
Though just as homely, would find more followers.



Roadside sign on highway between Columbus, GA., and Augusta, GA., 1940 (Marion Post Wolcott, photographer)

The American Consensus: Civic, Not Religious

By Oliver “Buzz” Thomas

“One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

I was sitting in an auditorium in Greeneville, Tennessee, listening to two Sudanese boys, whom my wife and I had helped through college, recite the pledge and take the oath of citizenship. Our Sudanese friends were Christian, but standing alongside them were Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and who knows what else. All different. All about to become American citizens.

Two days later I was reading a prominent atheist’s tirade against all things religious when I was reminded what a unique country we are and what a tall order being a good citizen really is.

On one extreme stand the “Theocrats”—those religious firebrands of the far right. The problem with Theocrats, of course, is that each one thinks he’s Theo. If they’re harping about prayer in schools, you can bet it’s their prayers and not yours. These are some of the same people who think that the earth is no older than your Great Aunt Edna and that hurricanes, tsunamis, HIV, and even 9/11 are instruments of God’s wrath—never mind if a majority of the victims happen to be innocent children or the elderly. I think these red-faced believers are wrong, but they’re our neighbors, and they’re just as American as we are.

On the other extreme stand the religious “nones.” I don’t mean the women in black habits but the people who, when the pollsters ask them their religious preference, reply, “None.” They’re Americans, too. They also happen to be one of the fastest-growing segments of our population, and two of their own, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, have been on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Therein lies America’s challenge. We have a big group on the far right and a big group on the far left with both groups planning to stick around. How, then, do we live together with such deep differences?

Better still, how do we remain “one nation, indivisible”? Is there any real hope for finding common ground?

Religiously? No. Thousands of different religious groups make their home in America, and the country’s largest group—we Christians—has hundreds of subsets. Even our subsets have subsets. Consider for a moment that Gore and Gingrich are both Baptists. So are the two Jesses—Helms and Jackson.

There is not and never will be a religious consensus in America. It’s one of a dozen good reasons why we should never return to the practice of teacher-led prayers in our public schools. The first and most intractable question would always be: Whose prayer? As I once heard Republican Senator Mark Hatfield put it, “I don’t have the time to write all those prayers, and I don’t trust anyone else to!”

If there is no religious consensus in America, then what? Are we, like much of the rest of the world, left to flounder in our diversity with no hope of finding common ground?

Before we throw up our hands and move to a gated community, let’s do as colonial patriot George Mason once admonished his fellow Virginians during times of trouble and return to “fundamental principles.” What exactly does it mean to be an American other than the fact that most of us were born here? Is it simply that we drink Coke, wear Levis, and shop at the Gap, or is there more to it than that?

At one time, for example, in order to be part of established colonial Virginia society, you had to be several things: white, male, land-owning, and Protestant—Anglican, to be more precise. It was that way in most of the colonies, though New Englanders chose to establish the Congregational Church. And, although we have moved beyond much of our parochial past, many Americans still carry around with them these notions of what it once meant to be fully American.

Being American, of course, has nothing to do with our gender, economic status, skin color, where we go to church or even *if* we go to church. Being American is about the principles and ideals set forth in our framing documents—namely, the Constitution and Bill of Rights. When naturalized citizens swear to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States, that’s what they’re talking about. America was the first nation to be founded not upon bloodline or kinship but upon principles and ideals.

Don’t get me wrong. Our “tribes” are important to us. It matters whether we are Baptists or Buddhists, male or female, Democrat or Republican. But as Catholic Theologian John Courtney Murray once reminded us, the Constitution does not begin, “We the tribe.” We are more than a tribe. Much more. We are a *people*. A pluralistic polyglot of races, religions, and creeds committed to a common set of rights and responsibilities. Freedom of religion, speech, assembly, and the press. Due process. Equal protection under the law. Not whether or how we choose to worship.

In a word, the American consensus is *civic*, not religious. Within this civic framework, there is indeed a common vision for the common good. When it comes to religion, that vision means that persons of all faiths, or no faith, will be treated with fairness and respect. In our public schools it also means teaching about religions fairly and impartially while respecting the First Amendment rights of all students. Minority and majority.

Are we up to the task? Honestly, I’m not sure, but the civic framework set forth in our framing documents has served us well thus far. Admittedly, it takes a lot of work. The words on those hallowed pages do us very little good unless they are etched in the hearts and minds of our citizens. And that is a challenge for a nation as diverse as ours. We must begin living by a new Golden Rule—a “civic” Golden Rule, as scholar Os Guinness calls it. It goes like this: My rights are best protected by protecting your rights. That means Jews standing up for the rights

of fundamentalist Christians and vice versa. It also means that the way we debate our differences is almost as important as the differences themselves.

If this sounds like the beginnings of a good resolution for a new century, I think you’re right. Perhaps I’ll take my own advice and stop calling them Theocrats.

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SURVEY

A Christian Nation After All?

Nearly two-thirds of Americans say the nation’s founders intended a Christian nation, according to a First Amendment Center poll last summer.

In the survey, 46 percent said they strongly agreed—and another 19 percent mildly agreed—that the Framers intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation.

The poll said 38 percent strongly agreed—and 17 percent mildly agreed—that the U.S. Constitution “establishes a Christian nation.”

The poll said 56 percent of Americans believe the constitutional freedom of worship extends to all religious groups, no matter how extreme. That represents a decline in recent years: the number was 72 percent in 2000.

Source: The First Amendment Center. The phone survey of 1,003 respondents was conducted Aug. 16-26, with a sampling error of plus-or-minus 3.2%.

The Spirit of “Post–Soul Politics”: A Covenant with Black America

By Eddie S. Claude, Jr.

An excerpt from the 2007 book, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, published in the U.S. by the University of Chicago Press. ©2007 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

“Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; ... its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems, and conditions of social life.” John Dewey, *Democracy and Education in the World of Today*

“We have come to the end of a language and are now about the business of forging a new one. For we have survived, children, the very last white country the world will ever see.” James Baldwin, “Notes on the House of Bondage”

I hold the view, and perhaps this reflects that I was born in 1968 and came of age during the Reagan years, that much of contemporary African American politics suffers from a woeful lack of imagination. We simply find ourselves, more often than not, imitating the methods of struggle forged in the 1960s and 1970s, and waiting, as if for Godot, for the next great leader, the next Martin or Malcolm, to deliver us to yet another promised land.*

Since February 2006, however, I have had the opportunity to be intimately involved in a moment that exemplifies what I mean by post-soul politics. Over the past eight years, Tavis Smiley, the powerful and prophetic African American media personality, has convened what he calls the State of the Black Union, a major discussion among various African American experts, thought leaders, policy makers,

and activists about the conditions of African American living. The event airs on C-Span every February and draws regularly a viewership of over 55 million people worldwide.

What is particularly striking about this gathering is that it has constituted a sort of yearly ritual. Folks gather around their televisions for an entire day literally glued to the discussion. The discussions take place live in front of large audiences who are invited to ask questions and to take the panelists to task. In short, the State of the Black Union constitutes a kind of public deliberative space, if only for a day, in which many African Americans (and others) throughout the nation sit and reflect with one another about their circumstances and, by extension, about the nation. It is a powerful illustration of democracy at work. But, again, the event is only one day.

In 2006, in conjunction with the State of the Black Union in Houston, Smiley released a book entitled *The Covenant with Black America*, a text that takes up ten important issues confronting African Americans in this country. The book turns out to be more than another top-down attempt to define the interests of African Americans. Instead, Smiley (perhaps the first African American with a social conscience to have a substantial presence in television, radio, and print) had gone on *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, a black radio show with an audience

* Editor's note: In his book, *Claude describes post-soul politics*: “On the one hand, the term simply refers to the period after the civil rights movement and black power era. It includes the political activity of persons born after the major legislative victories of the civil rights movement, the first of whom came of age during the Reagan years.” On the other hand, *Claude writes*, post-soul refers to conditions and sensibilities emerging in black America since the turmoil-filled mid-1970s: “That new phase was marked both by many African Americans experiencing unprecedented inclusion in American society, which altered the nature of their political commitments and actions, and by heightening levels of poverty and unimaginable violence, which circumscribed the life chances of large numbers of African American men, women, and children.”

of 10 million people, and asked African Americans to write in and list the most compelling problems they experienced. Issues emerged ranging from health to education to criminal justice to the digital divide, and Smiley convened a group of experts to write on these issues, collected a body of facts about them, listed best practices in response to the issues, and insisted that individuals hold themselves as well as politicians accountable in relation to them.

The book materializes, then, out of a communicative space mediated by radio; its content reflects a broad-based consensus about *particular* problems faced and the need for conversation and debate about how *best* to respond to them.

A National Conversation

On February 25, 2006, Smiley walked on stage, book in hand, to thunderous applause and proceeded to engage in this yearly rite of black democratic action. The difference, however, was that the deliberative space made possible by the State of the Black Union was now between the covers of a book and could move beyond a single day. In fact, Smiley organized what he called the Covenant Tour, in which town-hall meetings in local churches were held in twenty cities throughout the country to localize the book *The Covenant with Black America*.

I had the privilege to participate in most of these meetings and witnessed firsthand the power of participatory democracy. Thousands of people gathered to discuss the content of the book and its relevance to their daily lives. In Baltimore and Washington, D.C., the issue of gentrification came to the fore. In Indianapolis, concerns over the state of African American children emerged as a central preoccupation. In Los Angeles, the issue of homelessness was important. In each city, some issue particular to the members of the community shaped the discussion of the Covenant, giving it special resonance and relevance to the participants.

Moreover, sustained criticisms of black leadership emerged. African Americans across the United States voiced a deep displeasure with the current black political class and demanded more accountability and responsibility. But the demands for accountability went beyond electoral processes; they involved a set of commitments, as evidenced in the Covenant meetings, to democracy as a way of living together.

In each city, Smiley would say, quoting Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), that “we are the leaders that we’ve been looking for.” He would go on to paraphrase Ella Baker about not needing a strong, savior-like leader. In each instance, the crowds

erupted with applause. *The Covenant with Black America* affirmed that each individual indeed had the capacity to transform his or her circumstances. In fact, the orientation of the book and of those of us who support it is based on a profound trust that everyday black folk can in fact engage in intelligent action if proper conditions are furnished. It assumes, with John Dewey, that democracy is “the road which places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number of human beings.”¹ As such, the book rejects outright the politics of racial custodianship and approximates the post-soul politics I commend.

While on tour we also acknowledged the generational divide—that many of us struggle with the burden of the symbolic weight of the 1960s. Smiley and I talked of our feelings of being born out of place and out of time: we did not march with Martin or organize with the students of SNCC; we did not stand post for Malcolm or serve breakfasts with the Black Panthers. Many young people nodded their heads in agreement and expressed their dismay along with the challenge of asserting their own voice.

The tradition of the struggle of a “blues people” saw not simply disease but possibility, understanding that the nation could have life if it would only learn to swing Duke Ellington style.

But *The Covenant with Black America* offers an occasion to reimagine African American politics. Thus a book stands at the center of this effort. That in itself is unusual. Moreover, the innovative ways in which information and communication technology have been deployed to forge solidarities around specific issues is unique in African American politics. But perhaps more important is the insistence on the centrality of the deliberative process, a commitment to participatory democracy, ensuring, as far as possible, that everyday people, with varied interests, aims, and ends, engage one another in efforts to secure goods that are commonly shared.

The meetings also occasioned moments of dissent. In Harlem, a young woman, about twenty-five years of age, stepped to the microphone and declared in a powerful voice that people her age were not reading *The Covenant with Black America*; that the book was not a “how-to guide” for getting paid and thus was of little interest to many young people; and, perhaps most startling to the people in the room, that she would not vote in the upcoming election. The crowd moaned. What followed, how-

ever, was a remarkable exchange. The young woman explained herself. She did not care to vote, because she believed her vote would not count. The panel, which included Marc Morial of the Urban League and Bruce Gordon of the NAACP, offered counter-arguments. I believed her conclusions represented an intelligible and reasonable judgment that our democracy was dysfunctional.

Tavis Smiley then made an amazing gesture. He had announced earlier, as he did in every city, that the Republican and Democratic parties had agreed to host a conversation about the Covenant with their presidential candidates. Now he not only offered her tickets for the events but proposed to fly her to them. The young woman ran back to the microphone and declared with amazing confidence, “I will do you one better. If you get me tickets to the events I will fly myself.” She was not out to “hustle” her way into the forums or looking for some handout from Smiley; instead, like so many young African Americans, she simply wanted to participate meaningfully in a genuine process. This moment, for me, illustrated the power of the deliberative space afforded by the Covenant.

What I experienced throughout black America over the course of the tour was an extraordinary expression of civic energy, something very unusual in these dark political times. To be sure, we have witnessed over the past few decades a civic power outage in our country. Many of our fellow citizens are too busy trying to make ends meet or too preoccupied with their own selfish pursuits to engage in public matters. Moreover, moralists who are seemingly not committed to the democratic

We have witnessed over the past few decades a civic power outage in our country.

virtues of open and free exchange have sought to hijack American public life. They want to cultivate instead a pernicious provinciality that results not in the formation of democratic character but in blind dogmatism. I am reminded of the powerful words of William James: “A mind too narrow has room but for one kind of affection.” This one kind of affection is often wrapped in the garments of piety. But as James says, “Piety is the mask, the inner force is tribal instinct.”²

These realities should not lead us to retreat into separatist enclaves. Instead, those of us, few though we may be, must find the energy to draw on the resources of this powerful but fragile experiment in

democracy, to save our country. The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson come to mind:

The existing world is not a dream, and cannot with impunity be treated as a dream; neither is it a disease; but it is the ground on which you stand, it is the mother of whom you were born. Reform converses with possibilities, perchance with impossibilities; but here is sacred fact. This was also true, or it could not be: it had life in it, or it could not have existed; it has life in it, or it could not continue.³

We must believe, not in a naive way, that our nation has life in it. *The Covenant with Black America* demonstrates that this is so and, in our current moment, constitutes a space where democratic hope can be found.

A Blues People

The Covenant with Black America stands within a particular tradition of struggle, a struggle of a blues people who found resources for democratic hope in the extraordinary capacities of ordinary people in spite of a wicked nation committed to wicked practices. The ideals of democracy inspired those who had been denied freedom and education to dream dreams, to imagine possibilities, and to hold on in the face of the withering storm to will themselves into a new day. This tradition never believed the lie that this country was an example of democracy achieved but, rather, understood intimately its failures and shortcomings, its blindnesses and deformities. This tradition saw nevertheless not simply disease but possibility, understanding that the nation could have life if it would only learn to swing Duke Ellington style. It is a tradition that, at its best, cultivated democratic dispositions in the face of strange fruit dangling from poplar trees, insisted on effective freedom as African Americans imagined a day that their children and children’s children would be able to actualize their capacities and potentialities, and struggled to ensure that every child would have access to the opportunity and skills to make good on the promise that is America.

In these trying times we must turn to the power of Emerson’s insight and the enduring purchase of traditions of struggle to muster the democratic hope and courage to challenge our nation and insist on a better future for our children—to educate them *and* ourselves into the habits of democracy so that this nation can be saved. I am convinced that the Covenant provides such an occasion—not one mired in the nostalgic longing of a glorious past but,

rather, one that looks into a distant future to ensure a better life for those yet unborn.

In “Notes on the House of Bondage”, James Baldwin reflected, among other things, on the challenges that young African American children face. He wrote, “What we see in the children is what they have seen in us—or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us.”⁴ Baldwin understood fully the task before him: to raise children in such a way as to make certain that “the American guile and cowardice [could not] destroy them.”⁵

His was a form of piety that was attuned to the lessons of tragedy in American life *and* forward-looking in its orientation, even until his last days. The epigraph to *The Covenant with Black America* reflects this orientation. The words of Terry Tempest Williams frame the ambition of the book: “The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time.” The Covenant instantiates a form of piety that begins with the dark side of American life; it confronts candidly the racialized experiences of this fragile experiment in democracy that cut short the lives of so many of our fellow citizens. The piety it commends is also forward-looking in its commitment to participatory democracy, in its insistence on speaking to the particulars of our current moment in a language in-

formed by the past but shaped by the present, and in its steady resolve to secure a better world for our children and our children’s children.

This sentiment was given powerful expression in a town-hall meeting in Baltimore. The last question was from a young shy girl, about eight years of age. She asked timidly, “What can I do to help the Covenant?” Some answered saying stand proud and never let anyone threaten your spirit. Others said make being smart cool. I simply said, in the democratic spirit of the Covenant, “Keep asking that question and tell us what you hear.”

Notes

- 1 John Dewey, “Democracy and Education in the World Today” (1938), in Dewey, *Later Works*, 13:154.
- 2 William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1994), 370.
- 3 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Conservative,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of Congress, 1983, 177).
- 4 James Baldwin, “Notes on the House of Bondage,” in *Price of the Ticket*, 667.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 668.

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TAKE HEART

by Jeanne Murray Walker

Who can grieve for it all?
The standard-bearer, seeing
his right hand shot off, grabs the flag
with his left and shouts *God Bless America!*
as he charges up the hill. An Iraqi child
shoos flies from her brother’s corpse.
News, they call it.
The gospel of atrocities.

Seeing a lemon, incandescent with light,
hearing the cry of a bird with the sky caught
in its throat, I can forget.
I woo heartlessness.
Would it necessarily
make me cruel or stupid?

On one of those cooking shows,
a new Chef appears. *Take heart,*
for instance, he says, paging
through his cook book: Heart.

A delicious muscle grilled,
baked or steamed with bamboo shoots.
Like liver or kidneys, but harder to find
in the better markets. Looking for a heart,
he opens his map of our neighborhood.
He pulls on his coat and hat.
The bags under his eyes are the color of nickels.

WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF

by Jeanne Murray Walker

There were days heaven seemed easy.
Days it came right down,
drifting into my hair like pollen.
Then it seemed so natural to pray.
Then everyone showed up in my prayer.
Talking was prayer, unlocking
the door was prayer. In those days,
I was all praise and thank you’s,
without even moving my lips.

People kill for less—
to be taken into the sky like that,
to walk as the holy do, without
exegesis, without even needing
to put longing into language.

Now the clouds above Chestnut Street
have clicked shut, locking us out.
One day our name is *hunch*. Next day
it’s *grudge*.

Oh, to live before we made
separations our theme. It’s as if
a child with a crayon drew a line:
here’s the sky, here’s the earth,
here’s a woman, here’s everything else.
Its name is Enemy.

The Challenge of Christian Citizenship

By Randall Balmer

In the fall of 2003, I accepted my party's request that I stand for election to the school board in the small Connecticut town where I then lived. Apparently, someone had the crazy idea that twenty-some years of teaching at Columbia made me qualified to say something about education.

I lost by four votes, out of more than eight thousand cast.

The following year I succumbed to yet another entreaty, this time to run for a seat in the Connecticut state legislature. I spent a good part of my summer knocking on doors. A dog took a bite out of my left hand. My opponent, a three-term incumbent, tapped into special-interest money and outspent me ten to one.

The day after the election, my wife suggested that we start looking at real estate in a different zip code.

I woke up that morning after the election with a hangover—and I hadn't been drinking. My own electoral fate quickly paled against what had happened on a national level, and for the ensuing several weeks I debated what I should do. Should I retreat into what could be a very comfortable, insular life as a tenured professor? Or should I do something to try to alter what I considered to be this country's ruinous course?

I vacillated for weeks. It was the example, finally, of my older son, then a sophomore at Columbia, that determined my direction. During the final week-end of that campaign, he had boarded a bus in New York City to campaign in Ohio. If he could do that, I decided, then retreat was not an option for me.

The Christian's responsibility of citizenship remains one of the most vexing issues facing individual believers. Jesus tells us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but what exactly does that mean? Taxes? Voting? Military conscription? Holding political office?

Christians have disagreed, often vigorously, about these matters over the centuries. And the finest taxonomy for understanding these positions, in my opinion, is still *Christ and Culture*, written by Yale's own H. Richard Niebuhr. Martin Luther understood the purpose of government as restraining evil so that the gospel could flourish, whereas John Calvin saw government in a more positive light—an opportunity to reform society through the agency of what he called the “lesser magistrates.” Groups like the Mennonites—“Christ against culture”—hold that a believer should shun worldly engagement, whereas theological liberals have often—perhaps *too* often—identified Christ with the culture.

My own thinking on this matter has evolved over the years. I remember trying to encourage my classmates at the evangelical college I attended in the fall of 1972 to become involved in politics, confident that as they did so, they would embrace an agenda similar to that of nineteenth-century evangelicals: opposition to war, equal rights for women, and care for those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” My classmates, however, expressed little or no interest in politics.

When the Religious Right emerged at the end of the 1970s, in response to the government's attempts to proscribe racial discrimination at Bob Jones University and other “segregation academies,” evangelicals awakened suddenly, and their politics almost immediately skewed toward the far right. Even as politically conservative evangelicals propagated the “abortion myth,” the fiction that the Religious Right came into being as a direct response

to *Roe v. Wade*, I was not too concerned. I was sure that their ruse would be exposed soon enough and that the Religious Right would collapse beneath the weight of its own contradictions.

How could those who claimed to adhere to the teachings of Jesus, the one who called his followers to be peacemakers and invited them to love their enemies, so blithely approve the deployment of military force? How could the lineal descendants of the abolitionists be so callous toward the poor? Even the Religious Right's opposition to abortion seemed inconsistent and oddly acontextual. It clearly did not emerge from any abstract commitment to the "sanctity of life," for (unlike Catholics) many of the same evangelicals who opposed abortion registered no objection to capital punishment or, more recently, to the government's systematic use of torture.

Second Coming of William Jennings Bryan?

The leaders of the Religious Right had utterly forsaken the legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activists, who invariably took the part of those on the margins of society. William Jennings Bryan, probably the most identifiable evangelical in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, would be considered a political liberal by almost any standard

My study of American religious history convinces me that religion always functions best at the margins of society, not in the councils of power, for when religion hankers after power it loses its prophetic voice.

today. Bryan, three-time Democratic nominee for president and Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state, advocated a broad array of liberal and progressive causes.

Bryan, however, had suffered a brutal character assassination at the hands of H. L. Mencken during the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tenn. in July 1925. Bryan died in Dayton several days after the trial, and evangelicals thereafter retreated into a subculture of their own making. Evangelicals (at least those in the North) had been largely inactive in political matters during those years, until the emergence of Jimmy Carter as a national figure in the mid-1970s. During this half-century of political quiescence, there was a good bit of Cold War rhetoric in evangelical circles, and this had the effect of nudging evangelicals toward the right. That tendency was abetted also by the very public friendship between Billy Graham

and Richard Nixon, who had formed a bond in the 1950s when they were both coming of age as anti-communist crusaders.

Carter's declaration that he was a "born again" Christian lured many evangelicals (Southerners especially) back into the political arena after an absence of half a century. His concern for racial equality and human rights comported nicely with the emphases of evangelicalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the leaders of the newly emergent Religious Right, who had been recruited into politics by Paul Weyrich and other conservative activists, wanted to take evangelicals in a different political direction.

Propagated in large measure by the televangelists, the agenda of the Religious Right began to take root, especially among America's evangelicals. Although most of this hard-right political ideology, I insist, was foreign to the teachings of Jesus and inconsistent with the noble legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activism, the leaders of the Religious Right were able to peddle their politics almost unimpeded for the better part of three decades. Other people of faith, notably mainstream Protestants, raised barely a whimper of protest, or so it seemed.

I too was complicit in this conspiracy of silence. To be sure, many Christians with less conservative political views were speaking their conscience, but those voices were overwhelmed by the Religious Right's masterful use of media. Leaders of the Religious Right also claimed that the absence of more liberal political voices in the public square was the consequence of a lack of theological definition.

Perhaps so, but I think the larger issue was neglect or apathy, and here I point the finger of blame directly at myself. I treated the Religious Right like a nagging cough or a bad cold. I thought it would simply go away.

The 2004 election convinced me otherwise.

The place of the believer in political discourse is both controverted and complicated, as H. Richard Niebuhr recognized more than half a century ago. Some take the words of Jesus to mean that Christians should shun politics altogether, a perfectly respectable and theologically defensible position. But to abandon the public square to ideologues of any stripe invites trouble, especially in a pluralistic society.

Precisely because the United States is a pluralistic society, religiously informed voices—from all parts of the religious and political spectrum—should be represented. I happen to believe that public dis-

course would be impoverished without voices of faith. But believers also need to recognize the dangers of political engagement. My study of American religious history convinces me that religion always functions best at the margins of society, not in the councils of power, for when religion hankers after power it loses its prophetic voice.

The history of the Religious Right illustrates this copiously. The Religious Right has become the Republican Party's most reliable constituency, much the way that organized labor once supplied the backbone of the Democratic Party. But the leaders of the Religious Right have tempered their criticism of Republican policies. Where are the voices of conscience calling the powerful to account for this government's persistent, systematic use of torture, for instance, or the justice of the war in Iraq? Christians can draw on centuries of thinking and writing on what constitutes a "just war": Is it a defensive war? Is the use of military force the last resort? Is the military deployment proportional to the provocation? Is there a reasonable chance of success? Have provisions been made, as much as possible, to shield civilians from "collateral damage"? The invasion of Iraq meets none of these criteria.

Not only has the Religious Right been silent on such matters, but its silence constitutes complicity in policies that, by almost any reckoning, are immoral.

Politically liberal believers, however, also need to guard against the same danger of seduction by power. In the 1950s, for instance, mainstream Protestantism was virtually indistinguishable from a kind of cult of white, middle-class, American respectability. Any concerted engagement of politically liberal Christians must be wary of compromising the faith for political ends.

For me, the 2004 election was a long overdue wake-up call. Having failed decisively in elective politics, I have turned my attention to writing and lecturing on matters of, I believe, great consequence. I refuse to allow the leaders of the Religious Right to speak for the faith that I cherish—to *distort* the faith that I cherish. I call my fellow believers back to the teachings of Jesus, the one who expressed concern for the tiniest sparrow and who invited his followers to be peacemakers. Somehow, I suspect that when Jesus asked us to love our enemies he probably didn't mean that we should torture or kill them. And I wonder how the words of Jesus imploring us to welcome the stranger might inform our immigration policies.

I also commend to my fellow believers the example of Christian activists throughout American history. Their motives were not always perfect, nor were their actions entirely praiseworthy, but those who struggled against the scourge of slavery or who fought for the rights of women or who sought to protect others against the excesses of predatory capitalism saw themselves advancing the kingdom of God on earth. Vernon Johns and Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis waged heroic, prophetic battles against evil—and managed in so doing to illuminate, rather than to compromise the faith.

Not every believer is called to elective politics—and I have new respect for those who are and yet manage to retain the integrity of their faith in the rough-and-tumble of the political arena. Others of us seek to exercise responsible Christian citizenship in other venues. One thing, however, is certain: The political history of the last several decades, which saw the virtually unchallenged ascendance of the Religious Right, demonstrates the perils of apathy and silence.

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CHRISTMAS TREES

by Geoffrey Hill

Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell
bleached by the flares' candescent fall,
pacing out his own citadel,

restores the broken themes of praise,
encourages our borrowed days,
by logic of his sacrifice.

Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late.



River baptism, Morehead, KY, August 1940 (Marion Post Wolcott, photographer)

Optimist in a World of Turmoil: An Interview with Jan Egeland

John Lindner and Ray Waddle

Jan Egeland, special adviser to the United Nations Secretary General, has been called “the world’s conscience.” Perhaps more than any other individual on the global stage, he helped marshal the compassion and resources of millions when genocidal catastrophe descended on Darfur and the tsunami devastated East Asia.

Born in 1957, Egeland has been on the case nearly thirty years as humanitarian, peace worker, and human rights advocate. His career began in his native Norway, where he served in the ministry of foreign affairs, at the Red Cross, and as a peace research fellow. Among his many accomplishments, he helped initiate talks that led to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accord in 1993.

In 2003 he was appointed United Nations under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator. This summer he stepped down from that position to return to Norway, keeping the title of U.N. special adviser.

Former U.N. head Kofi Annan hailed Egeland as a tireless advocate who “coordinated our humanitarian efforts in neglected and forgotten crises, from northern Uganda to Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo” and “traveled to the frontlines of conflicts to bear witness to the suffering of civilian populations in Darfur, Sudan, Colombia, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and brought the world’s attention to the suffering there.”

Egeland has seen the world enter a new century marked by terrorism, globalization, the renewal of religious politics and other challenges for nation-states and their citizens.

Reflections adviser John Lindner and editor Ray Waddle recently sat down with Egeland at the United Nations for this interview.

REFLECTIONS As someone who has dealt with civil conflicts where religion is often in the foreground, how do you think about the issue of religion and citizenship? Is religion part of the problem, or a solution to global conflict?

JAN EGELAND I now have been doing peace work and conflict-related work since I was 19, when I left Norway for Colombia, Latin America. I worked there with a Catholic relief organization called Minuto de Dios, “God’s Minute,” and since then I’ve been involved in a dozen peace processes in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Balkans. I have seen faith-based organizations and churches be both at the forefront of peace efforts and at the forefront of aggression, strife, and even violence. At times you see them on both sides at the same time. It can be very confusing to one who comes from the outside looking at the situation. Like many others, I have observed that the church, and religion, and Christianity can work both ways. ... There’s a lot of mobilization on either side.

The strength of religion, of course, is it offers a lot of positive energy and idealism, like in Latin America, where there are priests willing to do anything for the poor, the vulnerable, the civilians. Yet then we see, for example in the Balkans, people are willing to do anything to tear down whom they are told are the enemies of your religion. And certainly for us peacemakers, if religion comes in on the wrong side, it pollutes the whole thing. ... How do you argue with people who say (in the Middle East): there’s nothing to discuss, read the Bible, it’s our land. Or: read the Koran. This is the third most important mosque in the world and cannot be compromised. ... So we seem to be going from a period of moderation in the religions to a period of fervent polarization. But there are very promising

forces, religious forces, in all these conflict areas, and we have to strengthen those, and we have to try to undermine those who misuse religion.

REFLECTIONS Do you see a pattern to what religion does right when it is part of the solution to civil strife? Are religious people putting doctrines aside and just getting out and pursuing ethical action? Is there something we can learn from certain examples?

JAN EGELAND When someone says, I am acting on the Gospel's main theme, which is love for humankind, it's a great thing, it's always been so. But when groups use the holy scriptures, on either side, as prescriptions—that's the biggest danger because then we get mutually excluding propositions, and we get strife forever. It's when they use the Gospel of love—let's find compromises, let's see how we can forgive, how we can meet the other side—that's wonderful.

REFLECTIONS Are the nation-state and the role of citizenship weakening today? Is there some failure in the notion of citizenship that's driving people away from national identities to religious identities as an organizing principle?

JAN EGELAND It could well be. It could be that globalization is, in a way, undermining the nation-state. Now we talk as much about the global community as we talk about regional communities—the northwest, the southeast and so on. I've been very struck and worried of late at seeing the new East/West conflict emerging. I grew up in Norway, a country in NATO...so the East/West conflict was part of my upbringing, and we were afraid of a third world war. Now that East/West conflict is over, and those once-heavily militarized borders now see a lot of exchange.

The new East/West conflict is between the capitalist/Christian West led by the United States and an Islamic East, perhaps especially the Arab countries. I hesitate to use the "struggle of civilizations" because it's a totally wrong concept, but those tensions are there. ... When you see in Jordan that 90 percent of the population define themselves as hostile to the United States and the West, in a country that has had a moderate, pro-Western monarchy, then something is happening here. And what is happening is a lot of frustration in many societies. They feel there is a dominant cultural force that has taken over, in a way, and they feel alienated. ... Some feel they should go back to their roots, the religion of their fathers and their forefathers, and they go to

extreme versions of it, fundamentalist versions. But as a Scandinavian I am taken aback by how some evangelical communities in the United States would speak about Islamic organizations and look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms that are void of the reality I have lived on the ground.

REFLECTIONS With the collapse of the Cold War, it's argued that the age of ideology, at least for a time, has been suspended, because so many political ideologies in the twentieth century were discredited, Marxism for instance, leaving only what—capitalism, Americanism, traditional religion? If that's the clash, can we get beyond it?

JAN EGELAND I'm an optimist. I may be wrong, but I've traveled now in 120 countries, and met more guerrilla leaders, mass murderers, more bad people than anybody alive, probably. So people say, Do you sleep at night? you must be very depressed, and so

I believe this generation has the chance to put an end to massive suffering as we know it. When you've got two billion rich and one billion with less than one dollar a day, it's nonsense that the rich do not lift them up.

on. And I say, no, I'm pretty optimistic, actually. The world is better now for more people today than it was in 1989. There is 50 percent more peace today than in 1989. We can prove it, it's been consistently researched. There is for the first time less than one billion people in the world who live on less than one dollar a day. In 1989, a group of researchers (that reports annually) found ten genocides in 1989, one today. In the 1960s there were between 20 and 25 military coups per year in the world. Now there are two or three per year.

So we're making progress, actually. It's not like it's going steadily worse. ... The image people have of the world going in the wrong direction is partly for the very good reason that we have more information than at any time before. So now we follow every bombing in Iraq and every killing in Palestine or in Israel; any shooting in America, we see. That's why it's important to try to get the overall picture: for instance hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty in East Asia and Southeast Asia over the last few years. ...

I also believe multilateralism will have a renaissance—in part, because of the debacle of unilateral

alism in Iraq and elsewhere. I think few people are aware that, in the last four or five years, peace has broken out in Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Burundi. War ended in Eastern Congo, in Northern Uganda, Nepal, and Ivory Coast. Why did it happen? Because the U.N. and regional organizations and neighbors came together and helped internal forces.

I believe this generation has the chance to put an end to massive suffering as we know of it. When you're got two billion rich and one billion with less than one dollar a day, it's nonsense that the rich do not lift them up. I mean more rich have fewer poor to lift up, so it's an obligation to do it. ... We can reach now any spot on the globe within twenty-four hours and start relief operations. We avoided hundreds of thousands of lives being lost in Darfur when a million lives were at stake of being lost. ...

So I am quite optimistic. I do see a renaissance of international cooperation. ... We're living now in a multipolar world. We've gone from a bipolar world when we grew up—Moscow, Washington, two poles—to a unipolar world, which my children have known—the United States, one pole—to now having China and India, emerging superpowers. In Africa, the United States is far less influential if you go country by country in Africa than China is. China is buying up Africa at the moment, and we have to do two things: recognize the importance of China, and then start to responsabilize China, not as a developing country, but as a superpower. So when the West understands we're not the only show in town, and when the rest of the world also no longer treats the West as the only show in town or the only enemy in town—then, I think, we're into a much changed mode, which will be much more positive.

REFLECTIONS How should religious communities begin to do the public education and find new paradigms needed for our national communities to engage an era of greater pluralism and multilateralism?

JAN EGELAND It's a very good question, a key one, because I see three clouds on the horizon, big ones, in an otherwise quite optimistic scenario with more peace and more prosperity and more international cooperation, better technology. The three clouds: one is the climate, which is the scariest; the second, which I mentioned, is this clash of cultures East/West; and the third is migration and migration pressures. The United States can still teach most of the other industrial countries a big lesson on migration. It is interesting to see that Muslim citizens and immigrants in America are generally less disappointed

than they are in Europe. Very interesting. It's easier for Al Qaida to get a foothold in Europe, it seems, than in North America. ...

It is a paradox that migration is growing and growing as an issue because you see more and more economic growth all over the world. However, the economic growth (of poor countries) still has been much slower than ours; they got less poor and we got filthy rich, which means that the difference is still so enormous. And then the additional trend is that they know, for the first time, exactly how rich we are. I suppose in Morocco (decades ago) it wasn't that clear how the Europeans lived then, and I know fifty or a hundred years ago it wasn't that clear in Central or South America how the U.S. was. Today they know exactly how life is in Miami and in London and in Oslo, and they don't want to live a life without jobs and without a good future.

REFLECTIONS If America is a moderating example, is it because of the nation's prosperity or the specific values taught here?

JAN EGELAND It's an immigrant nation, and you have a system whereby wave after wave after wave came. Interestingly, the Muslim wave in recent generations was not worse off than the Irish were or the Polish were and so on. Yes, there was struggle, but there was also the possibility to get out of it. Whereas I

Religion has to work intensively with itself to avoid becoming a tool of conflict and again clearly be a tool for peace.

think many of the Muslim immigrants who came to France and Britain and (elsewhere in Europe) seem never to get into mainstream society. This may be the one big lesson we have to learn in Europe from America still. ...

REFLECTIONS In international circles and at the U.N. there is much conversation about "civil society," a particular term that isn't very well known in the United States. Does the civil society notion provide a better framework for thinking about the public role of religion today?

JAN EGELAND Civil society means a lot. One of the very hopeful trends is that you see student groups, women's groups, farmers' groups, trade union groups, humanist groups, faith-based groups, all organizing to work for good. I was the keynote speaker in Singapore a few weeks back for World Vision's global retreat. World Vision (a global Christian relief organization) started as a U.S. evangelical organization, and is now the biggest aid organiza-

tion on earth. And it's global now. You'd see mostly non-Americans among the people who came from all over the world—fundraising as much nearly in Hong Kong and Shanghai and Bangkok and Singapore as they do in Minneapolis and Seattle and other strongholds. So we see civil society in many forms and shapes. And the most hopeful is we see it a lot in the (global) South. With the tsunami you would see a lot of Asian groups, Middle Eastern groups come to the relief of the people, not only the Northwesterners. Again, this new world has the capacity to go in the right direction.

And of course, civil society can also be a great force for peace, development, prosperity, education, human rights, civil rights. However, as a good social democrat and Scandinavian, I must hasten to say: there must be a state. If there is no state structure, then we see that, in Africa and so on, you don't get development in the larger society. In many places now, the problem is that the state is too weak. There are many interesting (civil society) movements but the state also has to be able to set standards—education standards, health standards, law, order. It's one of the biggest problems in the South that we have weak states and bad governments—but good civil society.

REFLECTIONS Does civil society in America look different from Europe?

JAN EGELAND There are many more faith-based groups in North America than in Europe. That is of course one distinguishing factor: secularism has been on the rise in a country like mine for the last one hundred years. ... That is the difference between Europe and North America. In Europe, you don't have revival after revival after revival as seen every ten years in America, where they say there are more than one hundred million evangelical Christians.

But, (in Europe) everybody is a member of several community groups, and it's very much centered around the children: choirs, brass bands, football, handball, volleyball, skiing, or environmental groups, political groups, and very, very strong international solidarity. So, it's interesting: even though Scandinavians pay more tax than anybody—I mean it's one percent of gross national income, which is more than five times the global average for rich countries—this hasn't affected fundraising through faith-based organizations, also Red Cross, humanist organizations, solidarity groups, and so forth. I discussed this with some American faith-based leaders who say you need to have the faith base to do the fundraising. I'm a Christian Lutheran church

member, but I've seen it's not necessarily so that it has to be faith-based to have international or national and local compassion. It can also be done by humanists.

REFLECTIONS This raises a perennial question. Is secularism strong enough to provide a moral basis for society? Can society rise to goodness without religion?

JAN EGELAND I think Scandinavia is a reflection of the trend of a strong rise over the last forty years of international compassion and solidarity. If you talk about the Norwegian taxpayer, who is the most heavily burdened in the world in terms of international assistance, (research) shows that nearly 90 percent of the population will say that we should be at this level or higher. A significant portion says we shouldn't go down from 1 percent to 0.15 percent, which is the United States (average). We should go from 1 percent to 2 percent. That is happening in a country where 4 percent of the population was in church in the last week, and 23 percent to 25 percent would say that they are believers, Christian or otherwise. This kind of feeling of international solidarity is very strong and comes from school, comes from parents. Those who say we should concentrate only on ourselves are seen as outcasts. ... So yes, you can have a very strong humanist orientation in a society. ...

But again, religion should play a role to bring us perspective: There is a higher ideal, a higher purpose in life. But religion has to work intensively with itself to avoid becoming a tool of conflict and again clearly be a tool for peace, because it is the ideal of every religion I know of to work for peace.

THE CENTURY'S DECLINE

by Wislawa Szymborska

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
that weren't supposed to happen,
and what was supposed to come about
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the valleys.
Truth was supposed to hit home
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren't going
to come up anymore:
hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn't funny.
Wisdom isn't gay.
Hope
isn't that young girl anymore,
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe
in a man both good and strong,
but good and strong
are still two different men.

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naïve ones.

Christian Anarchy and Reconciliation: A View from the Pulpit

By Wesley Avram

“We believe that everyone—political figure or commentator, citizen or alien, man or woman, black or white, conservative or radical—who at this particular time says that this people and this nation are in deep, perhaps irremediable political trouble, speaks the truth.” Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway

Some words come back, decades later, with haunting relevance. Back in the 1960s, these two southern churchmen, Will Campbell and James Y. Holloway, co-edited the journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, called *Katallegete—Be Reconciled*. A collection of their essays from that journal was published in 1970 under the title *Up to Our Steeples in Politics* (Paulist Press), from which these words are taken. They’re eerily timely, and yet manage to unsettle any and all complacent contemporary political assessments:

Stated simply, we believe that the fundamental crises in our land rise from the obsession with politics, the faith that the political order is the only source and authority from which we can and ought to seek relief from what ails us as a community and as individuals. Because there is in our land no real challenge to these obsessions, we believe that our crises will deepen, perhaps even beyond a point of no return . . . (p. 111)

In 1970, they were calling into question what they termed the “political messianism” of Christian liberals. Nearly forty years later, it seems the Christian Right took the bait and has been for two decades the more successful purveyor of this apostasy—the belief that we are called to create via political action what the New Testament claims God has already accomplished for us in Christ: reconciliation. Liberals, however, haven’t abandoned such messianism themselves; they’ve just been outflanked lately.

Yet with the Christian Left now resurgent in the wake of the Right overstretching in Iraq, it is worth considering ways in which Campbell and Holloway’s warning goes both ways. They identify an error that

Christians of any stripe risk when they trust Caesar over Christ. Such misplaced trust confuses politics—a means to an end, which is justice—with the end itself. Despite flowery theological or biblical rhetoric energizing the church’s political action, the church falls under Caesar’s yoke to the extent that the church trusts Caesar to do its bidding. “Surely our calling as Christians is not summed up by a vapid, pathetic and generally ineffective effort to inject morality and high-mindedness into political activity,” write Campbell and Holloway. Ouch.

And they go on: “Is obedience to Christ exhausted by immersing oneself in Caesar’s definition of politics? Is witness to Christ’s victory uniting all men best made by service to what Caesar judges as the urgent issues of our times? Might it not be that Caesar himself is confused, or is lying?” (p. 118). Caesar lying? Was this written in 1970 or last week? Why would we think that we participate in anything but a lie when we dip our feet into politics?

The error is not in taking political action, but in trusting that action too much—or trusting it wrongly. When power corrupts, it corrupts the innocent as well as the cynical. It distorts the language we cherish, taking deeply rendered Christian themes of reconciliation, justice, mercy, compassion, and righteousness, and using them in the name of issues and enterprises not our own. Do we need more evidence than our nation’s recent foreign adventurism, couched as it is in the language of Christian conscience? To free ourselves from this distortion, we must work as hard to change the subjects that dominate political debate as we work to sway opinion about the subjects we are handed by the powers that use us more than hear us. To Christian con-

science, perhaps national security or preservation of American values should not take priority over compassion and justice for the poor and weak. The church has no borders, after all.

I realize that in making this point I'm stretching credulity, for one of our most difficult challenges in the American church is deciding who, at the beginning and end of all of this, is "us"? Are we Americans, Christians, Christian Americans, or American Christians? To what "we" are we preaching? Every time I step into the pulpit I must remind myself that my people are complex creatures—power brokers as much as victims, well-meaning citizens seeking to do good as much as baptized believers yearning for another commonwealth. We are caught up in the myths of the American nation-state as much as we are partners in a borderless world church. "We" are mostly Americans, yet in solidarity with brothers and sisters at the Eucharistic Feast; "we" are also Palestinians, Chinese, Ugandans, Mexicans, Iraqis, and more. In the pulpit, I must never say "we" without identifying which "we" I imagine, and I must gently stretch my hearers' views of their own definition of "we."

Campbell and Holloway remind us of two things: that iconoclasm can be a vital current within ortho-

We can live as if we are reconciled, even before our politics catch up, even before we agree, even before we approve of each other, even when some refuse to see it yet.

doxy, and that a healthy dose of sectarianism in the church's social witness might be healing. They write in a great and too-often ignored tradition of Christian anarchy, and they apply their anarchic impulse to many areas of Christian social concern. This impulse can be described as a refusal to acknowledge any monopoly of secular means over holy ends. It is a refusal to confuse economics with commonwealth, process with peace, schooling with knowledge, development with justice, commerce with community, progress with hope, relentless pursuit of happiness with joy. Most recently, Protestants like Jacques Ellul and Roman Catholics like Ivan Illich have reminded us about the power of this tradition of Christian anarchy. They remind us that trusting techniques of human invention as primary vehicles of the divine will amounts to idolatry, and should be treated as such.¹

Does this Christian anarchy demand that we retreat from the "real world" and refuse to "make a difference"? Are we to hold ourselves up in Christian enclaves, relying on what the world can give us but not making any contribution toward the common good of those who don't share our enclave or speak our language? I don't think so. I do not read here a counsel to withdrawal but a counsel to reset our terms of engagement. We are to engage and wish peace upon the city and work for it as best we can. But as noted above, we are not to trust it too much, or like it too much, or confine our desires to its standards too much, lest we begin to confuse it with our home. When we mistake it for our home, I dare say we're no blessing to it at all. We're simply useful.

God's Politics vs. National Politics

Campbell and Holloway are working within the kind of distinction Stanley Hauerwas described a few years later. The distinction is between a political church that seeks to produce justice within a polity gone wildly off kilter and irretrievably distant to the ways of God, and a church that is first a peculiar politics, giving witness to the justice that God has already accomplished in Christ (beyond and more powerful than economics and politics, and passionately nonviolent). We are called to give witness to what we begin to see—that God has already reconciled the world in Christ. And so reconciled, we need no longer kill each other because we are afraid, or angry, or belittling, or prejudiced. We can live as if we are reconciled, even before our politics catch up, even before we agree, even before we approve of each other, even when some refuse to see it yet. And by so living, we will humble the political for the sake of a new politics, God's politics. And we might effect in time some of the very reconciliation we claim.

Well-meaning Christian citizens have told me this view is naïve in a world such as ours, distorted as it is by sin. They've counseled me to preach realism instead, even a Christian realism. And I'm trying to hear their pleading. I want to be a useful preacher to folks who have power in the world to "make a difference." They want to be confirmed in their beliefs and challenged to develop. They want Christian perspectives on the news of the day or on policy issues related to the environment, schools, civil rights, foreign affairs, and more. I want to be helpful to them, for they're in church for good reason and want to do what's right. I will keep trying to help them along their way. Yet I still find something deeply lacking in my intent, something nagging at my anarchic conscience. Even as I find myself

preaching in the hallways of civil, academic, and economic power, I am restless for something far more radical and far more political than what responsible Christian citizenship can ever encompass. I find myself wanting to preach a more profound reconciliation, as cryptic as it might seem to some. What is more “real,” after all, than what the borderless church sees, and does, and proclaims? And what is more “real” than what the church says God has already accomplished for us in Christ? And what is more “real” than suing for a peace that is deeper than the peace that politics can give, and joining with others to live that deeper peace quite despite the assurances of wiser heads that such living is not only impossible, it is dangerous?

I once visited with a wise older friend who had recently retired from a noble and eventful ministry. On the wall of his home was a framed sermon. I asked him why it was framed. It was the first sermon he preached to the president of the United States, he told me. It was from the first of several visits a sitting president made to his church. The framing made an impressive piece of memorabilia, though it surely represented only a small slice of his ministry. I might have framed it too, were I him. I shouldn’t pretend that I am free of my own nationalism. Yet, where Christian anarchy reigns, a sermon to a president is no more noteworthy than a sermon to an AIDS worker, homebuilder, or almsgiver. Anarchy refuses to make an idol of power.

If I am hearing the Bible, I must think twice before submitting to the subtle restrictions I accept when I become a chaplain to the reigning order—be that reigning order military/industrial, commercial, political, economic, or even religious; be it conservative, liberal, radical, or moderate. The church must live within the reigning order wisely and use its goods for holy purpose, but we must also work to resist the empire’s logic and question ways the empire tells us we are to be the church. We must still sow seeds of a more fundamental dissent. We must imagine an alternative order and invite others to join us in the imagining. And we must count the cost. I want to believe we can.

Note

- 1 See Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, new edition, tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); David Cayley and Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (House of Anansi Press, 1995).

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SURVEY

Christians First, Then Americans

Most American Christians think of themselves as Christians first, then Americans, according to a 2007 poll by CNN.

The survey said 59 percent identify themselves primarily by their faith, while 36 percent of believers described themselves as Americans first, Christians second.

The results invited comparisons with a similar poll of American Muslim attitudes conducted this year. A Pew Research Center poll showed 47 percent of Muslims in America said they are Muslim first, American second. (In England, polls show 81 percent said they are Muslims first. In Germany, 66 percent said they are Muslim first.)

With younger American Muslims, the sentiments were reversed: 60 percent said they were Muslim first.

Overall, the Pew poll said Muslim Americans have a generally positive view of the larger society. A large majority of Muslim Americans believe that hard work pays off in this society. Some 71% agree that most people who want to get ahead in the U.S. can make it if they are willing to work hard.

In the CNN survey, nearly eight in 10 Christians said people of other beliefs could get into heaven; 17 percent believe only Christians can.

Source: CNN and Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.



Men waiting outside before a church meeting starts in Heard County, GA., 1941 (Jack Delano, photographer)

The Divided Generation: Religion, Youth, and Public Life

By Robert Wuthnow

An excerpt from his new book, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*.
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Newspaper and television stories about religion often focus on specific issues, such as how religious groups feel about abortion or prayer in public schools. These are important, and they make for good news stories because some advocates on both sides of the issue can usually be found for a timely quote. Usually, though, the deep background is missed.

That background has to do with how Americans understand the history of our country and the principles on which our nation was founded. In the 1960s, Robert Bellah borrowed Rousseau's term "civil religion" and applied it to the United States as a way of describing these deeper understandings.¹

Our civil religion is most simply described as the use of God language with reference to the nation. It includes a myth of origin in which the religious beliefs and practices of early settlers, explorers, colonists, and founding fathers and mothers are emphasized. It also includes assumptions about the religious values that make America strong and about what our nation should do to be good and to avoid evil.

Bellah has suggested that civil religion in the United States is a pastiche of biblical ideals and what he calls civic republican traditions. The biblical ideas emphasize America's Christian (or sometimes "Judeo-Christian") roots, whereas the civic republican traditions focus on secular understandings of democracy, law, and justice.

A careful understanding of American history emphasizes the contribution of both. However, in popular discourse it is easier to focus on one or the other. That, in fact, has been one of the underlying tensions in recent debates about religion and politics.

The public registers a striking level of agreement with statements that reflect the core tenets of Ameri-

can civil religion.² For instance, almost four people in five (79 percent) agree that the United States was founded on Christian principles, with 51 percent agreeing strongly, and only 18 percent disagreeing. Similarly, 80 percent agree that America has been strong because of its faith in God (54 percent agree strongly).

However, younger adults are much less likely to hold these views than older adults are. Only 37 percent of adults age 21–29 agree strongly that the United States was founded on Christian principles, whereas 71 percent of adults age 65 and older agree strongly. On this statement, the percentages who agree strongly rise steadily as one proceeds from younger to older age groups.

The same is true for other statements. Thus, 39 percent of adults age 21–29 agree strongly that America has been strong because of its faith in God, compared with 69 percent of those age 65 and older who say this.

Why might young adults be disinclined to believe that the United States was founded on Christian principles and that its strength depends on its faith in God?

A plausible interpretation would focus on the possible effects of rising levels of education. A person with little formal education might believe that America was founded on Christian principles, for instance, whereas someone who had been to college and learned about the Enlightenment, deism, and

the complex sources of America's founding principles would be less likely to emphasize the nation's Christian roots. Because younger adults are more likely to have finished high school and attended college than older adults are, this might also account for how the different age groups respond to questions about civil religion.

Relatively few young adults currently believe strongly in the kind of connection between Christianity and the American nation that in earlier periods defined our civil religion.

Further analysis of these data shows, in fact, that these responses are influenced by levels of education. People who have attained higher levels of education are less likely to score high on the Civil Religion Index.* Among those who have been to college, those who majored in the social sciences and humanities are less likely to score high on the index than those who majored in other fields, such as the sciences, engineering, or business (where discussions of American history would have been less frequent). Those whose parents had graduated from college were also less likely to score high on the index.

Signs of a Cultural Shift

However, the fact that the differences between younger and older adults remain even when levels of education are taken into account suggests to me that we are seeing evidence of a larger cultural shift.

When people now in their sixties were growing up, it would have been easier to learn explicitly or to assume tacitly that the United States had been and still was a country based on Christian principles. Chances are, the religious convictions of the Puritans were emphasized in textbooks. In many schools, prayer in the classroom was still practiced. From reading the newspapers during the Cold War, a person could easily have gained the impression that America was a God-fearing nation pitted against godless communism. The Christian dominance in

the culture might have been further reinforced by anti-Semitism or by expressions of intolerance toward atheists.

Younger adults nowadays have grown up in a very different cultural environment. Whether a person goes on to college or not, that person is likely to have attended a grade school and high school in which very little was said about religion. Certainly prayer would not have been part of the public school room. More of one's cultural information would have come from television, and even the best documentaries and news programs would not have emphasized Christianity.

In short, the cultural climate has changed. And one of the big results of that change—whether one believes it was a change for the better or worse—is that relatively few young adults currently believe strongly in the kind of integral connection between Christianity and the American nation that in earlier periods defined our civil religion.

Understanding how views about American civil religion have changed also goes a long way toward helping us make sense of the current culture wars about the place of religion in the public life of our nation. For instance, consider the recurring debates about whether it is appropriate to display the Ten Commandments in government buildings or teach them to children in public schools. Young adults are less likely than older adults to favor these ways of bringing religion into the public square.

However, even among young adults, there are clearly differences of opinion on this issue. And those differences can be understood largely in relation to how young adults feel about American civil religion. Thus, 69 percent of those who scored highest on the Civil Religion Index strongly agreed that public schools should teach the Ten Commandments. In comparison, only 19 percent of those who scored lowest on the index thought this.

The fact that civil religion is no longer as popular as it probably was in the past has another important implication for young adults. It means that the main place in which this understanding of American history is reinforced is in religious contexts, not in the wider culture. Thus, young adults who attend church regularly are more likely to score high on the Civil Religion Index. And evangelicals are significantly more likely to score high than are mainline Protestants or Catholics.

It is little wonder, then, that young adults who are active church-going evangelicals feel that they are in tension with the wider culture. Just as self-

* Editor's note: Wuthnow created a Civil Religion Index giving people a point for each of four statements with which they strongly agreed. The statements were: the United States was founded on Christian principles; America has been strong because of its faith in God; our democratic form of government is based on Christianity; and in the twenty-first century, the U.S. is still basically a Christian society.

described religious conservatives feel divided from self-described religious liberals, evangelicals who believe strongly that America should be a Christian nation are divided from their contemporaries who do not feel this way.

Mixing Religion and Politics

Candidates from both parties have increasingly mixed religious rhetoric into their political discourse, although some have been more comfortable doing so than others. As the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy went out of his way to deny that his religious convictions had any bearing on his conduct of public office. Lyndon Johnson also seldom

Whereas young adults are less likely than older adults to think of America as a Christian nation, they are more likely to consider it acceptable for political leaders to talk about religion.

made public reference to his religious beliefs. Richard Nixon seldom did, either, although he frequently invited evangelist Billy Graham to the White House. After the Watergate scandal and the brief presidency of Gerald Ford, the public was eager for a president who spoke openly about the importance of morality in public life, and in Jimmy Carter not only received that but also elected a born-again Christian to the highest office. Ronald Reagan was more comfortable speaking about God than George H. W. Bush was. Bill Clinton sometimes referred to God in public speeches and in the 2000 election both Al Gore and George W. Bush made references to God.

Watchdog groups, such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, typically voice concern about candidates and public officials bringing religion too visibly into the public arena. Yet the American public is generally supportive both of political leaders talking about religion and of religious leaders talking about politics.

Younger adults, having grown up during a time when political candidates brought religion into their speeches, are slightly more likely to regard this mixing of religion and politics with favor than older adults are. About eight in ten Americans (79 percent) in their twenties, thirties, and forties believe it is okay for political candidates to talk about their religious views in public and for religious leaders to express their views on social and political issues, but this number slips slightly (to 77 percent) among people age 46–64 and then drops further (to 69

percent) among people age 65 and older.³

Young adults affiliated with the various faith traditions do not differ from one another very much in how likely they are to consider mixing religion and politics in these ways acceptable. Evangelicals and black Protestants are somewhat more accepting than mainline Protestants and Catholics, but the differences are small.⁴ Not surprisingly, young adults with no religious affiliations are less eager for religion and politics to become intertwined.

The curious aspect of these attitudes about mingling religion and politics is that they run counter, at least in part, with young adults' views about civil religion. Whereas young adults are less likely than older adults to think of America as a Christian nation, they are more likely than older adults to consider it acceptable for political leaders to talk about religion and for religious leaders to talk about politics. The two issues, though, are not the same. Civil religion implies a cultural *establishment* of religion, and especially of Christianity; in contrast, talking about religion and politics in the same venues can be interpreted as a *voluntaristic* form of free expression. The former can seem heavy-handed or inconsistent with historical reality, while the latter can be accepted as an opportunity for people of faith to speak about their various views.

Why It Matters

Political scientists point out that young adults in general may not be an important consideration in the political process because they fail to act on their political convictions. There is some truth to this claim. Yet in other ways, according to a survey, younger adults were not so different from older adults. About the same proportion in all groups had attended a political rally or meeting. And, probably because some of them were still working toward degrees, more in their twenties than in older groups had attended a class or lecture about social or political issues.⁵

In this study, religious tradition was associated with neither higher nor lower levels of political participation among younger adults. Evangelicals were the most likely to have contacted an elected official, mainline Protestants were the most likely to have given money to a political candidate or party, and black Protestants were the most likely to have attended a political rally or meeting and to have worked for a political campaign. In each instance, though, young adults affiliated with some religious tradition were more politically active than those affiliated with none. Those who attended religious services regularly were also more likely to have been

By Robert Wuthnow

Well before anyone wrote about culture wars, it was evident that Americans were becoming increasingly divided along a conservative-to-liberal spectrum that included religious as well as political considerations.

A 1984 poll conducted by the Gallup Organization showed that a fifth to a quarter of the American public considered itself very conservative in religion and about the same proportion considered itself very liberal.

What was most disturbing was that religious conservatives mostly held negative views of religious liberals, as did liberals of conservatives, and the more contact each had with the other, the more these negative views were reinforced.

That study provides a baseline for comparing responses of young adults in a more recent study—a survey Gallup conducted in 1999 that drew on a similar sampling technique and asked the same question about people's religious orientation. The results show a significant amount of religious polarization took place during this fifteen-year period. Simply put, more young Americans identified themselves as *very conservative* or as *very liberal* in 1999 than had done so in 1984.

Thus, the proportion who placed themselves at the most conservative point on the scale increased by more than two-fold from 4 to 9 percent and the proportion at the most liberal point almost doubled from 11 to 19 percent. This evidence suggests that young adults are more divided in their religious orientations now than they were in the early 1980s.

What also has to be considered is that the religious conservatives are much more active religiously than religious liberals are. For instance, among the religious conservatives in the 1999 study, 56 percent said they attended religious services nearly every week, whereas only 14 percent of the religious liberals did. To the extent that young adults are divided religiously, then, the division is along behavioral as well as ideological lines. On the one side are those who participate regularly in their congregations and hold conservative religious views; on the other side are those who seldom participate in congregations and hold liberal religious views.

These self-descriptions also correspond closely to the various measures of belief we have considered previously. For instance, more than 90 percent of religious conservatives say the Bible is divinely inspired, while only two-thirds of religious liberals do. More than half of religious conservatives claim they read the Bible at least once a week; about 10 percent of religious liberals do.

If ideology is reinforced by lifestyle, it is also worth noting the ways in which young adults who consider themselves religious conservatives differ from those who consider themselves religious liberals. Conservatives are more likely to be in their thirties and a large majority are either currently married or have been married, while liberals are more likely to be in their twenties and single. About three-quarters of religious conservatives are parents, while fewer than half of religious liberals are.

But what separates religious conservatives and religious liberals most clearly is how they view political and social issues. When asked about their *political* views, 70 percent of religious conservatives said they were also politically conservative (19 percent placed themselves left of center). In contrast, 77 percent of religious liberals said their political views were also liberal (19 percent described their political views as conservative).

politically involved than those who attended religious services less often.

The other argument that is sometimes made against taking religion very seriously (in politics) is that people in the middle are more than enough to counterbalance those at the extreme right or left. This is the same argument that critics of the culture wars thesis have made. It correctly draws attention to the fact that many mainline Protestants and Catholics make political decisions on an issue-by-issue basis. It also correctly emphasizes that black Protestants usually vote differently from white evangelicals, despite sharing many of the same beliefs.

Nevertheless, most of the evidence we have considered points to a widening gap between religious conservatives or evangelicals, on the one hand, and religious liberals or the unaffiliated, on the other hand. Whether mainline Protestants, Catholics, and other groups will be able to mediate between these extremes, or whether they, too, will be drawn toward the extremes, is one of the major questions that will shape American religion in the foreseeable future.

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Notes

- 1 Bellah, *Beyond Belief*; Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*.
- 2 The data discussed in this paragraph are from my 2003 Religion and Diversity Survey; further detail is presented in my book *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*.
- 3 These figures are from my Religion and Politics Survey.
- 4 The differences are on the order of about 6 percent.
- 5 This information is from my Religion and Politics Survey, conducted in 2000. Twelve percent of respondents age 21 through 29 had attended a political meeting or rally in the past year and 26 percent had attended a class or lecture about social or political issues.

* Adapted from *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Copyright ©2007 by Princeton University Press.

Less Partisan, More Political: A Way Forward for Churches

By Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

From *Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way* by Kathleen Townsend. ©2007 by Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. By permission of Grand Central Publishing.

Today, our sense of Christian virtue is both more and less political than it has been throughout our history. It's more political in that our churches tend to dwell upon a few politically contentious questions—abortion and homosexuality in particular—at the cost of other important issues.

I wouldn't suggest that abortion be ignored; it's a critical moral issue for millions of Catholics, myself included. Nor would I belittle the concerns of many of my fellow Catholics regarding our increasingly crass and sexually explicit culture—or about what they perceive as threats to the sanctity of marriage by having the state officially sanction homosexual unions.

At the very same time, our churches have become far *less* political—by shrinking from the public sphere and redefining morality as a limited set of personal choices alone.

The point here is that religious leaders are subverting their authority on issues of public moral responsibility by focusing exclusively on issues of private moral behavior. Even as it turns up the volume on a subset of moral imperatives, it barely whispers about so many other concerns that any honest reading of the Bible would reveal as central to Jesus' teachings.

These two "faith-based" movements, one sliding toward partisan politics and the other moving away from participatory politics, have cheapened our churches. They have diminished our civic life. And they have ultimately failed our spirit.

Today, we've essentially created a one-dimensional cross: one that looks up and down at the morality in each individual human life, which of course is important, but fails to look consistently across human lives at our collective and social responsibilities. The focus on sexual abstinence, for example, misses the point that we are not just called

to avoid evil but to do good. We are called to love, not just refrain from premarital sex.

Now more than ever, we need our churches to recapture and reclaim their true heritage, to get back their conscience and reclaim their credibility—to become, at once, more political and less partisan.

That process will begin by rediscovering the true source of Jesus' power—what we might call His holy trinity of ideals: faith, hope, and love.

Faith gives us the ability to believe what might, in an increasingly rationalistic world, be increasingly hard for some to accept: that an Intelligent Being beyond our understanding has created this world and me in it. I can't prove it as though it were a scientific proposition, but, as Emily Dickinson has said about heaven, "Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the Checks were given." Because I believe there is a Creator, I trust that the world has a purpose, that there is a shaping mind. I know there is something transcendent about my life, something that is holy and sacred, something that laws of physics, chemistry, biology cannot describe; and I know that the same holiness is in every human being.

Hope gives us courage to face the world's terror, sadness, sickness, and evil. Hope lifts us even where the most powerful pessimism tugs at our heels. With hope, we envision a better future for ourselves, our children, and grandchildren—and for the children and grandchildren of those less fortunate. No longer immobilized, we can act.

Love of course is, as St. Paul said, the greatest virtue—the one that gives birth to all others. It is the

virtue we are most in need of today. In a world that seems to build barriers every day, love is a bridge. It asks us to reach beyond ourselves to see the face of God in people who may not look like us, think like us, pray like us, or act like us. Love asks us to listen.

It is time for a spiritual rebirth in America. That might surprise you to hear—because we’re a very religious country. The media reminds us of that fact all the time. But no—it is time for a rebirth that recaptures the true creed of Jesus.

Power of the Parishioner

One of the best examples comes from my hometown of Baltimore: Rev. Frank Reed, pastor of Bethel AME Church, which is home to 16,000 members. Not unlike many urban churches, about 20 percent of Rev. Reed’s congregation is made up of former addicts, and his church has established ministries to reach out to people struggling with addiction and to those in prison. When I spoke to him recently, he said he felt a responsibility to “awaken people to their political responsibility, to the political nature of life.” The Bible, he says, teaches us that we must be engaged in the effort to “meet the needs of the people. We must be involved politically.”

Political involvement must extend beyond our community. God’s Word is universal. Our work to enact it must be as well. Few understand this as well as the author and activist Ronald Sider, who founded Evangelicals for Social Action thirty years ago. Sider has criticized mainline Protestant denominations for their neglect of evangelizing. At the same time, he has been unyielding in his denunciations of evangelical congregations for ignoring economic injustice and hunger. The twin missions of evangelizing and social justice should work together. Speaking to a reporter for *Christianity Today*, Sider told the story of a young South African who, he said, “was literally afraid that if he became a Christian he would lose his passion for justice.” The lack of social action, he says, is in fact an impediment to evangelism.

Suppose you agree with my vision. How do we get there? What if they continue to resist the call for change—the Catholic hierarchy continuing to underplay too many of Jesus’ teachings, and too many Protestant churches preaching a very private form of virtue?

Then, the power is in the hands of individual worshippers, who can and should try to reform their congregations and the larger institutions.

Meet with your priest or minister. Organize the congregation to do things that benefit the community. If you speak, others of like mind will not only

listen. Their voices will join the chorus, too. These “movements” tend to begin locally, but when they are strong and heartfelt, there is no limit to what they can accomplish.

It is probably easier to reform and renew Protestant congregations than the Catholic Church, for they have a long tradition of bottom-up reform. But those who are committed to change in the Catholic Church, too, have happily carved out a path for themselves and our Church. Either way the principles are no different. When progressive members of the congregation believe that their faith is in some way being short-changed, it is their duty and opportunity to lead the faithful somewhere better.

Once we take that first, fundamental risk and let the love of God and of each other fill our lives and actions, it is like the experience of falling in love.

The churches I envision will not hesitate to chastise those who neglect the poor and ignore the sick. Their clergy will be righteously angered by inequality and by unjust war. They will not forget to remind Jesus’ followers that we are “the salt of the earth,” responsible for preserving God’s good earth. They will spurn shallow consumerism. They will be more troubled by the torture of prisoners than by same-sex marriage.

Perhaps most important, the reborn churches of the twenty-first century will care as much about the actions of groups of people and governments as they will about personal moral behavior. Though it’s true that people make the world, the world also makes people. It’s time our most powerful moral authorities made clear that the need to better society comes before self-fulfillment and self-improvement, not the other way around. The Christian self comes with loving one another, not simply from self-improvement. Indeed, we cannot have a purposeful life that is pleasing to God without leading a life devoted to our fellow human beings.

I am encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, which was both a warm-hearted disquisition on love and a ringing call to *service* to the least among us. He wrote, “Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel.... For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.”

The stakes are high. If the Church refuses to reform or simply obeys the law of inertia and stays stuck in its ways, many of us will continue to meet in smaller Eucharistic communities, or in interfaith groups, to satisfy this yearning. If radio stations stop playing music, you can be sure that the people will find it elsewhere.

The consequences of reinvigorated Christian churches reach far beyond our houses of worship. If our churches are true to their creed, our civic life, too, can be reborn. I believe that if our churches were consistently preaching and teaching and focusing our attention on public morality as well as private actions, our politics—on both sides of the aisle—would be more focused on justice, on attention to the poor, and on preservation of the earth, among other things.

We are called to work for justice—and express rage at injustice. Over and over again, our religious traditions say that the worst injustices are committed by those who care more for money (and power and fame and other material signs of “success”) than for each other.

If you find yourself recoiling at this language, thinking it all sounds too trite and partisan, ask yourself why. Why has the language of justice lost its power? Why have we let it be displaced by partisan rhetoric? Have we become so weary and cynical that the second a moral problem begins to sound “tainted” by politics, we tune it out, for fear of getting trapped in a cycle of political recrimination?

We can do better. In a world with more complex problems and more power to solve them than ever before, we must do better. Much of our political and religious rhetoric may be bankrupt. But we are not impotent. We can join with others to reinvigorate our commitment to the common good. Faith and justice are not only compatible; they are powerfully complementary.

“A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair,” wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. A *mitzvah*, he once said, is “a prayer in the form of a deed.”

Once we take that first, fundamental risk and let the love of God and of each other fill our lives and actions, it is like the experience of falling in love. We will find energy, enthusiasm, even joy in the experience of helping one another, even if the objects of our affection are people we don’t know, may never meet, or might even fear if we met them

on a deserted street corner. These are the spiritual roots of our work. They give us strength and inspiration to move forward.

The reborn churches of the twenty-first century will care as much about the actions of groups of people and governments as they will about personal moral behavior.

This has been our challenge ever since we were ejected from the Garden of Eden, where all our needs were attended to, and we had no need for each other, save companionship. Because we need each other, we have a responsibility to make a contribution to one another, to love our neighbor, and to judge not, lest we be judged.

As my father said in an interview with David Frost nearly forty years ago, “You can always find someone that has a more difficult time than you do, has suffered more, and has faced some more difficult time one way or the other.” You can always find someone; but too many of us, for far too long, have given up even looking.

In claiming that we have a duty to care for the least among us, I may be accused of not living up to what the Lord said myself. That I don’t deny. I can’t pretend that I am not sinful or weak. I am. Still, faith gives the enormous power of transformation. We can forgive, we can heal, and we can be healed and forgiven. The faith that has the power to move mountains can also tackle the seemingly impossible challenges—poverty, hunger, disease, violence. When powered by faith—given strength by Jesus—we can act. Those actions, and the hope that accompanies them, can be a source of enormous liberation. We need not be stuck in our anger, our bitterness, our frustration. Just the opposite. To believe means we can be healed and enjoy an enormous sense of freedom.

Let us let the power of Matthew course through our veins: “You received without paying, give without paying.”

It is time we stopped distorting faith to serve politics or silencing the better angels of our nature. It is time we started allowing faith to breathe freely and speak honestly, seeing the holy in our fellow human beings and our duty to one another on God’s earth.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, the eldest child of Robert F. Kennedy, served two terms as lieutenant governor of Maryland (1995-2003).



*"Car Mennonites" gathered for church in Blue Ball, PA, alternating each Sunday with the "horse Mennonites," 1942
(John Collier, photographer)*

Re-engaging Mainline Christianity for Critical Citizenship

By Peter Laarman

I write from the premise that things are already quite far gone for the general health of constitutional democracy and the civic sector in the United States. I believe most readers of this journal will agree that these are no ordinary times and that what used to pass for moderation—for Arthur Schlesinger’s “vital center” in 1949—might well appear radical today in relation to how far rightward things have shifted.

My second premise is that within the same mainline Protestantism that has been dismissed as totally fossilized (“historic Protestant Christianity” is the term commonly used) lie seeds of significant civic renewal. Those seeds need watering, of course, and they need nurturing, but the case is by no means hopeless. There is a still-small “yes” muffled beneath the loud “no” that many are quick to pronounce over these diminished bodies.

And here I must acknowledge my own instinctive “no.” I grow frustrated over the dithering and lack of direction I see within the mainline. Put bluntly, how many heirs of historic Protestant Christianity in the United States today find themselves in active resistance to what Walter Brueggemann calls the “dominant script” of a society organized around narcissism, the pursuit of private wealth, and the aggressive and increasingly ritualized humiliation of the poor?

Notwithstanding the bleak overall picture, part of the mainline has already recovered the consciousness that the church receives divine grace for the sake of a suffering world and not for the private consolation of its members. That is an important start—a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a re-engaged critical citizenship. And by a re-engaged citizenship I do not mean that liberal church folk should constitute themselves as yet another wing or adjunct of the Democratic Party. My hope is not that the church turn political in that

sense but simply that it become more courageously the church, bearing a light and bringing a perspective that is neither Red nor Blue but that is much deeper, clearer, and more compelling than any current partisan ideology.

White Male Protestant As Outsider: A Conversion Narrative

In my judgment the single most grievous lapse in civic consciousness today—and also the most grievous lapse in the perspective held by most mainliners—is an almost serene obliviousness to the asphyxiation of democratic institutions and subversion of the public interest by private power and private interests.

On this point I realize I remain stubbornly at odds with a conventional wisdom that sees corporate dominance as natural, necessary, even benign. Indeed, as the years go by I sometimes feel like a crank for having to point out that government of, by, and for Wall Street regents and hedge fund hegemony is not quite the same as government of, by, and for the people. In insisting upon this difference I even begin to feel like a person of the nineteenth century, perhaps a distant kinsman to William Jennings Bryan. And I suppose that in some key respects I *am* a person born out of time. Without doubt my way of seeing the world was shaped by a peculiar set of formative experiences going back to the Upper Midwest of the 1950s.

I grew up among Dutch Calvinists whose forebears settled Holland Township along the Lake Michigan shoreline in Sheboygan County, Wisc. My father returned from wartime service to run the same dairy farm that his father and grandfather had operated from the early years of Wisconsin statehood. The politics of the place were solidly Republican, but even as a little kid I could sense a difference between the country-club Republicanism then gaining ascendancy and an older yeoman-farmer Republicanism that still had not been quite extinguished in the century that followed the GOP's founding in Wisconsin in 1854—the year in which my great-grandfather set up his farm. My dad, certainly, had a strong strain of populist anger in him that I avidly absorbed, even as my antiwar activism in college began to generate a painful estrangement between us.

Shopping our way, so to speak, through a time of unspeakable violence brings with it a kind of spiritual sickness.

In college I formed a parallel and equally strong commitment to racial justice, but the genesis of that had nothing to do with residual rural populism and everything to do with the way the leaders of the Black Freedom Movement in those years started to excavate the *other* key strand of America's buried history—not just the economic struggle of urban workers and small farmers but the titanic liberation struggle of a people first enslaved and then further abused on these shores for over 350 years.

I could not have built my life around commitments to economic and racial justice absent one other key influence. At my college we had two extraordinary campus ministers—both Yale Divinity graduates—who punctured our pretensions and did their level best to get us engaged with the big issues then roiling U.S. society. Brown's senior chaplain—Charles Baldwin—used what seems even now like shocking language to help me put my life into real perspective and keep me from clinging to the safer shores. “*LAARMAN, you're a FRAUD!*” was a typical Baldwin greeting. Charlie assumed that I knew (and I did know, because I listened closely to his sermons) that this was his way of alluding to the cheap grace I enjoyed as a campus radical.

It wasn't all raillery. When I concluded, under these same chaplains' influence, that I could not in good conscience take any human life under military orders, they helped me through the C.O. process, even finding a lawyer to help me out when my Wis-

consin draft board turned down my initial application. And later, when I wrestled with my vocation, no longer able to feel that I could justify my original plan to spend my life teaching English literature, they gently suggested that I give seminary—their seminary—a try.

Divinity school didn't take, or at least *I* did not take to *it*, during that trial year. I was still deeply angry over what I took to be mainline complacency on civil rights and Vietnam. And as someone still struggling to come out fully as a gay man, I could not then sort out the difference between church condemnation of homosexuality and Christ's unconditional welcome. I dropped out of YDS to become a community organizer and then, for fifteen busy years, a trade union activist and strategist. It took all of two decades before I would finally drop a note to the Fund for Theological Education (administrator of the old Rockefeller Brothers trial year program) that said, in effect, “You win.”

Disembedding the Mainline Option

I tell my story without imagining for a moment that the kind of education I experienced—the scales falling, not all at once but nevertheless falling steadily during my formative years—is something that can be reproduced easily or canned into some kind of crash course for active citizenship. Yet I feel that a roughly similar awakening is what is most urgently needed today within mainline congregations and seminaries. Were it up to me, I would focus civic leadership training on two realities: first on the systemic economic violence that characterizes this culture, and then on the untapped power of the prophetic faith tradition to deconstruct and counter the regime of violence.¹

The violence is easily described. Noted pastor, teacher, and movement strategist James M. Lawson, Jr., calls it the violence of plantation capitalism. It encompasses the millions of jobs outsourced or else badly degraded via the “temping” of the U.S. workforce, and it includes stagnant or falling real wages and salaries over three decades for those in the middle, even as incomes and real wealth accumulation at the top soar to stratospheric heights. It includes the evisceration of workers' right to organize over the course of these same decades, the lethal vise of overwork and debt that stifles the family lives of so many working parents, and the plunge in earnings for those at the bottom to the point that many full-time workers either find themselves homeless or must rely on food stamps and food pantries to feed their families.

The violence includes brutal cuts made to cash public assistance and health care coverage for the very poorest even as the corporate welfare trough overflows with new subsidies and giveaways; it includes the return of involuntary servitude for a significant number of the more than two million locked away in America's thoroughly racist and now partially privatized prison system; it includes the grotesque unfairness of both the tax code itself and of IRS enforcement that targets the returns of the working poor while turning a blind eye to shameless tax cheating by the wealthiest. Finally, the new ruthless economy wreaks its horrific violence through the ongoing engineering by conservatives of what Yale political scientist Joseph S. Hacker aptly terms "the great risk shift": shifting the burden of paying for health care, education, and retirement to individuals and away from the society as a whole.

The church retains access to a taproot of prophetic tradition reaching way down and way back—not back to Voltaire and Jefferson but all the way down and back to Miriam and Moses.

Although this unsparing economic violence hides itself in relatively plain sight, almost no one—and almost no one within the church—*calls* it violence, *names* it as virulently undemocratic, or even acknowledges its existence. The reason has to do with its protective bubble.

I will sketch three different but not disparate bubble effects. The first will be grasped immediately by those who follow such iconoclastic journalists as Bill Moyers, Amy Goodman, and Jon Stewart. As first observed more than a quarter-century ago by Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, this is the numbing effect created by our light-'n'-bright-entertainment-cum-advertising digital culture—a culture in which metastasizing soft features gradually subvert critical reflection and destroy narrative coherence.

The second bubble effect, obviously linked to the first, is what happens to a democracy when voting for the American Idol becomes more compelling to most people than voting for an American President. What happens when politics becomes a diverting personality contest thinly superimposed over the preceding—and far more consequential—money vote that determines who the actual party candidates will be?

Bill Moyers frames the challenge eloquently:

We talk about problems, issues, policy solutions, but we don't talk about what democracy *means*—what it bestows on us, the power it gives us—the astonishing opportunity to shape our destiny. I mean the revolutionary idea that democracy isn't merely a means of government, it's a means of dignifying people so that they have a chance to become fully human. Every day I find myself asking, Why is America forsaking its own revolution? (*The Christian Century*, April 17, 2007)

How many voters today, let alone non-voters, conceive of voting as an action that profoundly shapes their destinies? Civic participation has been thoroughly trivialized and downgraded—nearly extinguished altogether in a culture of distraction and diversion.

The third bubble effect is still more insidious and damaging. Pulitzer-prize-winning writer Marilynne Robinson critiques Americans' passivity in response to increasing petty coercion (*Social Research*, Spring 2004; reprinted in *Harper's*, August 2004). She concludes that this land can no longer be described as the land of the free and the home of the brave. In the face of government bullying and ceaseless corporate and media intrusions, we behave—most of us—like lambs led to the slaughter and like sheep that before their shearers are silent. The third bubble effect, in short, is the one we ourselves create by surrendering to the other two.

The Creatively Maladjusted Church

In sketching a pervasive economic violence I cited the vise grip exercised by overwork and ballooning personal debt in private life. I now cite an additional factor that closes the iron triangle of spiritual and psychic oppression. That third factor is the corrosive consumerism to which few are immune. Yale theologian Serene Jones speaks of how our deepest desires have been marketized and thus fundamentally betrayed—how we are suffering through an epochal crisis of the heart and of the imagination while barely comprehending the damage done. I will add only that shopping our way, so to speak, through a time of unspeakable violence brings with it a kind of spiritual sickness. Try as we might, we will never repress all knowledge of the torment—that of others and that of ourselves—that lies groaning beneath the floorboards of the "typical American lifestyle."

So now a question: How can people escape the bubble and gain release from the iron triangle

without disintegrating and without falling into the clutches of the Loony Left or the Rabid Right? More specifically, how can the *church* help us to come to our senses—literally—in time to salvage democracy and restore common decency?

Chicago Theological Seminary's Susan Thistlethwaite argues that the main task today is to re-evangelize the church itself. Our task is to call it to account in precisely the areas where it has been least honest and least faithful to Jesus—its idolatries of flag and altar, its subservience to wealth, and its smug exclusion of those it judges to be “less than.”

I agree, but I also see this as a monumental task that can potentially frustrate and exhaust those who begin to undertake it. It is so much easier for prophetic leaders to bypass the culturally embedded, captive church and to make common cause instead with the secular insurrectionists. The problem, of course, is that bypassing the church also means forfeiting its irreplaceable language. It means refusing the vital nourishment that is still divinely supplied to us from within the tradition, like manna in the wilderness.

Among the nourishing resources is, first and foremost, the *independence* of the church. Here I mean not just its First Amendment independence but its capacity to function as a uniquely free social space on account of its grounding in a powerful alternative discourse. Weak-kneed as its leaders may sometimes be, the church retains access to a taproot of prophetic tradition reaching *way* down and *way* back—not back to Voltaire and Jefferson but all the way down and back to Miriam and Moses. James Lawson notes the real significance of Moses' call, which is also our own call today: Moses begins to see the world the way God sees it, after which liberation becomes his only agenda.

So yes, we can give up on the church, but the cost to ourselves and to the world would be too great. However much we may weary of its dithering, we should never forget what the Spirit-led church *can* do, independently of any ideology of Left or Right: it can name domination systems in its own distinctive and still-resonant language; it can proclaim and also demonstrate just what community looks like by lifting up the traditions of Sabbath and Jubilee; it can rouse us from our numbing and narcosis and supply us with the long narrative and the critical frame we need in order to recover coherence in a culture of planned incoherence and narcissistic idiocy; it can awaken us to the suffering *and* the hope unfolding all the time within the justice struggles of those at

the bottom; and, by no means least among these gifts, it can renew and delight our spirits through the beauty of its rituals and songs and stories.

I once preached that the church at its best functions as a tiny but effective air purification system planted somewhere within a giant smoke-filled room. Its success won't be measured by whether it clears the air immediately but by whether it keeps its filters clean. In a culture where the smoke is getting thicker, surely a church that might be smaller but that is creatively maladjusted in the way Dr. King envisioned is preferable to a church that is larger but less honest and less provocative than it needs to be.

Susan Thistlethwaite has it right. If we want to salvage American democracy, we should start by disembedding and re-evangelizing the mainline church. Start the Long March within the rusting but still resonant ecclesiastical hulk. And for the cynical, this word from Karl Barth, who once asked in anguish whether the church does anything more than “disclose the deceitfulness of men.” Barth's answer: “Our duty is to take seriously and to heart the known tribulation of the Church and to wrestle with God, the God of Jacob: ‘I will not let thee go except thou bless me.’ ”

Notes

- 1 The reader might ask, “Why is this guy harping on domestic economic violence when the more troublesome edge of U.S. violence is on hideous display right now in the Middle East? Has he been living under a rock?” My answer is that U.S. imperial violence from the Spanish-American War right up through the present is directly traceable to the underlying economic violence I describe. This is the main burden of the monumental historiographic work done by William Appleman Williams, and no one since Williams has been able to disprove or significantly discredit his argument. Of course I support mainline antiwar activism and I am significantly involved in it myself. The danger is that the churches will think their job is done when this war is winding down and will neglect to work on the root causes of our “warring madness.”

Peter Laarman earned a degree at Yale Divinity School in 1993 and is executive director of *Progressive Christians Uniting*, based in Los Angeles. He is editor of *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

A Nation Faces Its Own “Terrible Alternatives”

by James M. Lawson, Jr.

In September of 1939 the word of God came to the prophet Dietrich, who was working in New York. Bonhoeffer arrived in New York in June of that year for his own safety. Ecumenical friends from around the West had urged him to flee Germany because as a very young prophet the word of God persuaded him that there could be no compromise between the Gospel of Jesus and the rising gospel of a Third Reich. He had become a marked man.

Nevertheless, by September the prophet Dietrich realized his ministry must be in the extremely dangerous place he called home.

Before leaving America, Bonhoeffer wrote Reinhold Niebuhr saying, “Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security.”

The churches of Germany and the vast majority of their members did not agree with the word of the Lord that their son was willing to receive and live. They accepted many benefits from the emerging militarized, authoritarian state, with its booming economy that employed millions, restored discipline, and purged certain unsavory elements. After all, they said, the racism did not “affect our daily lives.”

On April 9, 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung (read “crucified”) in Flossenbug Prison.

The prophet Jeremiah faced a similar quandary. Around 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is attacking Jerusalem. King Zedekiah sends members of his palace cabinet to Jeremiah, seeking a wonderful word from the Lord that the Babylonians will withdraw in defeat. Unfortunately for Judah, the word of the Lord that Jeremiah heard presented them with another terrible alternative: “... I am going to turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands. ...

I Myself will battle against you. ... I set before you the way of life and the way of death” (Jer. 21). Surrender to the enemy and live.

These two prophets were not robots. They loved their God, which meant they loved their people, their culture, and their lands. But they dared to speak and live out of the word of God that clasped their lives: terrible alternatives.

Whether we know it or not, whether we will wrestle with it or not, Christians and other religionists in the USA confront a similar “terrible alternative.”

We must actively seek the defeat of our Iraq syndicate! We can call this the Kennedy Doctrine, the Bush Doctrine or the Tyler Doctrine: The point is our invasion of Iraq is not some accident in contradiction to our history. All our homegrown, anti-democratic, economic, political, military and white-civilization chauvinism, the advocates for world domination, voices and powers that have been—all have merged with unprecedented force to produce the Iraq War and the perpetual war on terrorism.

In other words, there have always been elements in our history advocating slavery, the abject conquest of the Indian, the American business domination of the Western hemisphere and the world. Those voices, principalities and powers of our denied history and intent now largely control the direction of our national government. They are supported by networks of movements that call themselves “conservative” or “theocratic” but are largely birthed out of the soul of slavery and racism.

If this direction of government is not defeated, our Constitution and Declaration of Independence will be largely replaced by our own version of the military security state.

The admirable aspirations of this 300 million people will crash in chaos and despair.

This is our twenty-first century terrible alternative.

Allow me to write this another way: Our government, which is supposed to reflect the well-being of this 300 million, is the number one enemy of peace and justice in the world today. It is the only superpower, and it is managed by its military and defense industry as lobbied by its plantation capitalism, which demands the right to make the entire world its plantation and to be sustained by our fleets in every ocean and by our nearly 800 military bases on every continent. Sadly, very few religionists can see this unfolding tragic, chaotic history. We cannot believe the sins of the past can come to power in the present.

Both political parties have governed by cultivating the fears of the people rather than our aspirations.

After all, more than half of us are baptized people. We do not have indecent intentions—except, most of the harm and evil wrought in any nation is executed by mostly decent citizens who think what they propose and do is for good and not evil, right and not wrong.

But too many of us are drunk with the wine of our own exceptionality.

Nevertheless, 2007 is not 1933. The USA is not Germany. Looking back, we know that Third Reich Germany not only engendered an extremely costly war, but also promoted the murder of upwards of 26 million people.

The prophet Dietrich did not have access to the unfolding future. Only the “word of the Lord” came to him. He did not proof-text chapter and verse in our Bible. Only the word came to him, simply insisting: Jesus is incompatible with Nazism and its drive toward a racialized, fascist, wealthy, military state with the right to invade at will.

Our terrible alternative is far more complicated and perplexing. Most of us have no serious knowledge of the state of our land. For decades many facets of our government have been secret and classified. Congress has not supervised or given oversight. Congress and presidents have provided the budgets and human resources for many governmental activities to be covert. We have little idea of what the CIA, FBI, military intelligence, Pentagon, State De-

partment or privatized entities do around the world in our name. For the most part we do not know that our so-called news outlets basically report what our governments want reported. We are largely unaware that massive corporations demand and receive governmental support as they spread plantation capitalism abroad and perpetuate the economic injustice of the colonialism of the last 500 years.

Unions and churches alike see our defense industry as benevolent and patriotic. We are ignorant of the high profits those investors and corporate heads receive. Their profits and salaries come from our tax dollars. So quality education for all the children of our land is robbed while many of the defense corporation CEOs receive millions of dollars annually. We pay the tax dollars from wages that have remained stagnant for most working families since 1969. With such policies we rob our children and young people of their access to life. We steal from the children of Africa, Asia, Central and South America.

Worst of all, the soul of our wonderful land has been poisoned (intentionally or unintentionally) by the spiritual forces of wickedness—namely racism, sexism, violence, greed, and materialism. (Our prophet Martin would insist upon adding militarism.) Most Christians are more influenced by the spiritual teachings of these forces than by the wisdom of Jesus.

This is the choice our people of faith face today. Do not think that the elections of 2008 will turn this USA ship back towards our miraculous experiment in self-governance. For decades both of our national parties have advocated militarism, the privatization of war, greed economics. They have dismissed goals of a world-class education for all the children of the land, an economy fully employing and benefiting the people, or dismantling sexism, racism, our culture of violence. Both parties have governed by cultivating the fears of the people rather than our aspirations.

We must quietly but audaciously withdraw our consent from this Clinton/Bush Doctrine. If we love God and this 300 million people, we must demand the end to these gathering forces from our past and insist upon governments that seek the equality, liberty and justice of all the people and move toward the beloved community.

James M. Lawson, Jr. *has been a strategist and mentor of nonviolence for more than fifty years. He was associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1957–68 in the nonviolent effort to establish justice. He was pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles from 1974–99 and is now a Distinguished Professor at Vanderbilt University.*

Paul's Primer For Politics

By John Danforth

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Christianity does not give us an agenda for American politics. It does not provide policy positions that we can identify with certainty as being Christian. What it does offer is an approach, a way of thinking about and engaging in politics that is highly relevant to our ability to live together as one nation, despite our strongly held differences.

For me, one chapter in the New Testament has been especially helpful in describing how a Christian might approach politics—the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This extraordinarily rich passage is virtually a how-to manual for the Christian in politics. Here are some thoughts that come to mind as I read it.

"Do not be conformed to this world," Paul tells us in verse 2. Yet we have a strong inclination to let our politics determine our faith rather than the other way around.

We have deep and long-held opinions about a range of political questions, certainly the hot-button social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, but also economics, foreign policy, national defense, criminal justice, and others. We may have come to these opinions any number of ways. We may belong to a particular party because our parents were members; we may support low taxes because we have high incomes; we may support the death penalty because we have been victims of crime. The various ways we come to our political opinions may have little or no connection to religion. But when we vest our personal opinions with the trappings of religion, we make religion the servant of our politics. By confusing faith and politics, we become conformed to this world.

Paul tells us to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (verse 2). God gave us brains and we are supposed to use them. To do the work of God in the world takes more than a good heart and a commitment of will. It takes renewal of the mind.

At times, the will of God comes in a flash, as it came to Paul on the road to Damascus. But Paul seems to realize that such revelations are the exception. More often, discerning God's will takes hard work. It requires us to think, to use our reason, to use judgment. Paul speaks of the will of God as "what is good and acceptable and perfect." At the same time, he speaks of renewal of our minds—plural. God wills what is perfect, but the perfect is a matter for the discernment of countless unique minds, and it transcends the discernment of any one mind.

Many times during my Senate years, constituents would say, in effect, "You're on the scene in Washington; we're not. You know what's going on; we don't. You tell us the answers." Such deference to government is never justified, for in a democracy we cannot afford to give the keys to the country to politicians, and then walk away. An ordinary citizen who takes the time to read a good newspaper can find out enough to have an informed opinion on almost every issue.



Nun collecting contributions outside Macy's department store, New York City, 1939 (Paul Vanderbilt, photographer)

Some people have asked me whether America is a Christian country. The answer must be no, for to call this a Christian country is to say that non-Christians are of some lesser order, not full-fledged citizens of one nation. The American way is not one group having its way. No part of our country can have a monopoly of what is good for the whole.

The problem with many conservative Christians is that they claim that God's truth is knowable, that they know it, and that they are able to reduce it to legislative form. Paul's message is quite different. We must "think with sober judgment," humbly acknowledging that whatever our thoughts, they are only "according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (verse 3). God has given us different gifts, different measures of faith. God transcends our ability to understand him, much less our ability to impose our understanding of him on others through the power of government.

The understandable criticism of many Christians is that we seem so certain that God is on our side and that we are on God's side. So the tendency is to adopt an us-against-them mentality. But Paul tells us we should not be "haughty" (verse 16). The dictionary definition of haughty is "disdainfully proud or overbearing: arrogant," which is exactly how we appear to others, especially when we transform our religious beliefs into a political agenda.

Paul orders us, like it or not, to love one another with mutual affection. Suppose we are seething inside, utterly contemptuous of another person. In the heated world of politics, that is a very likely state of affairs. Then what? Paul's response could not be more clear: "love one another with mutual affection" (verse 10). Regardless of how we feel, Paul tells us how we must act. We must act as though we love the other person. We must outdo one another in showing honor, even if we are gritting our teeth in doing it.

The Senatorial Language of Affection

In politics, it is important to act as though we love one another, even where there is no underlying feeling of love. In the Senate, the language of affection and respect, even to the point of unctuousness, is the lubricant that allows the Senate to function. Senate rules state that one member is forbidden to verbally attack another, and he will be compelled to take his seat if he does so. To assure that debate is on the issues and is not personal, senators are supposed to speak by addressing the presiding officer and not other senators. But beyond these rules of decorum, senators regularly outdo each other in showing honor, heaping praise on colleagues

whether it is warranted or not. A common manner of speaking is, "No one has worked harder than my distinguished colleague to bring this bill to the floor," when, in fact, the distinguished colleague may have done little more than add his name as a co-sponsor of the legislation.

Outdoing one another in showing honor is a long tradition in the Senate, but it has universal application. What Christianity brings to the arena of political conflict is a duty to act with mutual affection and show honor, even when we don't feel like doing so. It is a duty that extends to our most disagreeable foes.

For those who practice politics as a career, the capacity to disagree in the context of friendship is not unusual. For ten years, I served in the Senate with my Missouri colleague Tom Eagleton. We are

I have the impression that today's Senate is less inclined than in the past to encourage the kind of interpersonal relationships that transcend the controversies of the day.

of opposite political parties, and we often disagreed on important issues, yet we were able to maintain a warm friendship that was well known to the people of our state. On many occasions, Missourians expressed to me appreciation that Eagleton and Danforth, quite different on the issues, got along with each other so well.

Every day the Senate is a battleground of hotly contested and constantly changing issues. Louisiana Sen. Russell Long once advised me never to let the disagreements of one day carry over to the next, for I might need today's foe as tomorrow's ally. The practical advice of a very practical politician is consistent with Paul's instruction that we "live in harmony with one another" (verse 16).

I have the impression that today's Senate is less inclined than in the past to encourage the kind of interpersonal relationships that transcend the controversies of the day. In the era of Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen, senators are said to have gathered together for drinks at the end of the day. Now that Senate business often extends well into the evening, the cocktail hour may not be the appropriate custom to revive, but it did bring members together in an informal setting. The Senate gym continues to be a haven of bipartisan informality. I have a vivid recollection of earnestly discussing complex civil rights legislation in the gym with a colleague, both of us

completely nude. It's difficult to be aggressive in such a circumstance.

Today, the intensity of politics pushes both politicians and the public away from the mutual affection Paul encourages. And many Americans believe that something has gone terribly wrong with our politics. They say as much when they tell pollsters that our country is on the wrong track and that they lack confidence in our government's ability to address major issues. They do not believe that either political party speaks for them, and they are offended by the relentless nastiness of what they see on television and hear during election years. Many times, ordinary citizens have expressed to me a sense of being powerless. They do not like the tone of politics, but they do not know what they can do to change it.

Indeed the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans seems out of touch with the reality of today's politics. No doubt it was just as out of touch with the reality of first-century Rome, or Paul would not have written it. That is just the point. These are instructions to Christians on how they should relate to a world given to meanness and to fracturing.

Engaging the Enemy

For all the non-confrontational emphasis of Romans 12, Paul is a realist. He recognizes what most of us take as the obvious: that we do have enemies, even very threatening enemies. We do not live in a make-believe land where everyone lives happily together. Paul goes so far as to call some of these enemies "evil." He assumes that enemies do more than create trouble. The enemies he speaks of persecute people. He speaks from his own experience as a former persecutor of Christians and an apostle to a persecuted church.

But Paul challenges Christians to assume responsibility for doing their part to live peacefully in a world in conflict. When Christians claim special knowledge of God's truth, when they divide America between "people of faith" and their "enemies," Christians become not the means of peace but the cause of conflict. In that case, Christians are far from being powerless. They are powerful contributors to what has gone wrong in American politics.

If Christians have the power to contribute to what is wrong, they have the power to right the wrong. They have the power to substitute the ministry of reconciliation for the strategy of divisiveness. Where Christians in politics often have been notable for their hubris, claiming that they speak for God, they can, instead, be notable for their humility, acknowledging that God's truth is greater than anything they can hope to express. Where Christians have

championed wedge issues that divide Americans, they can substitute a search for common ground on which Americans might unite to address common challenges. Where Christians have polarized our politics, pushing us to ideological extremes, they can rebuild our political center and help bring us together. Where Christians have been quick to anger, they can show honor to their adversaries and bring civility to our politics.

"So far as it depends on you," Paul says. Well, a united America does depend on us. It is the responsibility of people who follow Jesus. It is not a political agenda. It is the ministry of reconciliation.

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RED IN CLAW

by Billy Collins

I am as struck as the next one
by an unexpected field of wildflowers,
early sunlight on the face of a granite cliff,
or the clear rush of mountain water in a stream.

But what really gets me
is the way one creature keeps looking around
when it is holding down a fellow creature
while biting or pecking it to death.

This morning was no different.
From the cabin window, I watched a hawk
swiveling its feathered head and mad eye
as it jabbed at the grey-brown field mouse

which was pinned to the ground with one claw.
Is it not instructive to see how this works—
the bird checking always for a thief
or for the shadow of a thing grand enough to take it down.



Homeless men at prayer before meal at city mission, Dubuque, Iowa, 1940 (John Vachon, photographer)

Faith Engaging Politics: Passion and Constraint

By David E. Price

Students of my generation at Yale Divinity School, who received ethics instruction from H. Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, and William Lee Miller, are likely to find the current renewal of interest in religion and politics both familiar and ironic. Familiar, because it highlights the relation of faith and civilization that Niebuhr explored as a “perennial” area of “Christian perplexity.” Ironic, because it sometimes places us in the surreal position of denying that we are aggressive secularists.

Speaking personally, I regard my undergraduate and YDS years, which coincided with the early civil rights movement and culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as the time when my political and religious identities were decisively shaped. Nowadays, religious conservatives claim the banner of faith-based politics for themselves, and their political leaders not only ignore the religious and moral roots of progressive politics but often portray the entire Democratic Party as hostile to the faith connection.

How has it come to this? Some of the religious groups that we criticized in the 1960s for their individualistic and otherworldly approach to faith have become politically mobilized, and their cultural conservatism has become a key component of Republican politics. “Mainstream” religious communities have often seemed confused or complacent. Some have mistakenly assumed, reacting to the excesses of the Religious Right, that the separation of church and state requires a separation of faith and politics. Some progressive politicians have even become reluctant to tell their own personal stories or to advocate their positions in moral terms. Among many mainstream congregants, nothing has ever quite matched the clarity and conviction of civil rights, and there has been a reluctance to take on religious conservatives in either religious or political forums.

Some of this confusion and complacency has begun to lift, thanks in part to the wake-up call furnished by the 2004 election. But it is not just on the religious and political “left” that such discussions have intensified. There seems to be a renewed awareness across the spectrum that the faith-politics nexus requires searching examination, and that this cannot and should not be mainly a matter of seeking political advantage.

Both our faith and our politics require the exploration of the wellsprings of our own vision for society and of the way our deepest values should shape public policy. It is in this spirit that Yale Divinity School has hosted various faith and politics discussions over the past year and that I have been asked to contribute to the current issue of *Reflections*. I will focus on the passion and conviction that faith brings to politics, the constraints on political power it inspires, and the theologically based humility that tempers our engagement.

Passionate Engagement

The rediscovery by many Americans of the Hebrew prophets and their call for justice that “rolls down like waters” (Amos 5:24) had far-reaching political and religious significance in the 1960s. Many of us came to understand that the familiar compartmentalization of life—whereby people who were loving and generous in their personal relationships

saw no contradiction in supporting laws and social practices that denied others their humanity—was ultimately untenable. The result was a new direction in public policy, charted by landmark civil rights statutes in 1964 and 1965.

Although civil rights remains a paradigmatic case, the prophetic imperative to “do justice and love kindness” (Micah 6:8) speaks to much of our political life. It requires us to cut through the welter of policy detail and ask what government is doing in our name—to subject military interventions to “just war” criteria, for example, or evaluate governmental budgets as statements of moral priorities.

The happy experience of the civil rights movement and of many movements since is that one can bring one’s deepest convictions to political advocacy and at the same time ally with people whose theological and philosophical perspectives differ greatly and sometimes do not have conventional religious roots at all.

Faith inspires passionate engagement in the political arena, but that does not mean that it is always simple or straightforward to translate religious and moral convictions into social action. Our faith traditions themselves reveal various modes of engagement—for example, the biblical roles of prophet and peacemaker. While the psalmist extols the blessings of “kindred living together in unity” (133:1), Jeremiah rebukes those whose desire for peace leads to passivity in the face of evil. “From prophet to priest . . . they have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (6:13–14). The life of Jesus displays a similar tension. Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr., may find creative ways of reconciling the roles, but often people of faith will be called to differing, even contrasting, modes of engagement.

Passion must also employ reason. In the legislative arena the calculation of consequences is essential. One of the few times during my service in Congress that I have referred explicitly to my seminary background came in early 2007 during a caucus discussion of a Democratic proposal to put conditions and withdrawal deadlines on a supplemental appropriations bill on Iraq. One colleague stated that because the bill did not immediately defund the war he was not certain that he, as a former seminarian, could vote for it “in good conscience.”

This prompted me to counter with the distinction, familiar from the first day of Ethics 101, between deontological and teleological theories of ethics, although of course I did not lay those exact terms on my colleagues. What if the result of joining Republicans in a “no” vote, because our proposal fell short of liberal members’ notion of perfection, was to bring it down? What if the consequence was to forfeit the best chance we might have for some time to compel a change in war policy? What if the result was to show fatal weakness and division and thus to compromise our longer-term prospects for taking foreign policy in a new direction? It was *precisely* “conscience,” I said, that required us not merely to measure our bill against an ideal standard but to count the costs and calculate the consequences of defeat.

The Search for Common Ground

Passion and conviction are compatible with seeking common ground with those who come to politics from other backgrounds or perspectives—indeed, they often require it. The happy experience of the civil rights movement and of many movements since is that one can bring one’s deepest convictions to political advocacy and at the same time ally with people whose theological and philosophical perspectives differ greatly and sometimes do not have conventional religious roots at all. This will often involve going beyond a specifically religious frame of reference, invoking the commonly held values and shared aspirations of the wider community. It also requires a willingness to “reason together,” as opposed to viewing our religious convictions as debate-stoppers.

Religious conservatives sometimes portray the search for common ground as requiring them, as one of my colleagues put it, “to check my Christian beliefs at the public door.” There is also a tendency to see the invoking of universal values as producing a mere “common denominator” that lacks specificity or force. That, I believe, greatly underestimates the power of the fundamental principles of our constitutional democracy, which have deep religious roots but also find broader resonance. Certainly it would have come as news to Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, as they invoked the Declaration of Independence to combat slavery and segregation, that making a universalistic appeal diluted their passion or the force of their argument.

What if such common ground is not to be found? Obviously, there are sectarian rules and observances that individuals and communities regard as binding, with no thought of extending them to the broader

community. But the boundaries delineating what may legitimately be taken into the public arena are neither clear nor uncontroversial. Some politicians, for example, including many who are personally opposed to abortion on religious or moral grounds, argue against “imposing” such beliefs on society. Others regard that position as unjustifiably preempting legitimate political debate.

The issue of gay rights, like that of abortion, evokes contrasting responses *among* religious communities; many people of faith, for good reason, believe that the same moral standards of fidelity and mutual commitment should apply to both gay and heterosexual relationships. Moreover, any attempt to translate religiously based disapproval of a particular sexual orientation into civil law is likely to conflict with broadly shared principles such as civil liberty, nondiscrimination, and equal opportunity, which themselves have strong religious pedigrees.

In such instances, the best course is often to stop short of codifying specific religious and moral precepts, leaving the individual and communal expression of conscience free. But we cannot always resolve such matters simply by declaring them “off limits” for political debate. Those who oppose efforts to codify or sanction various aspects of personal

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morality will often need to challenge the proponents directly, within religious and other institutions of civil society as well as in the political arena.

Many questions surround the agenda for engagement—not only what issues are best left free of governmental prescription but also how to prioritize the wide range of issues with implications for faith and morality. Religious communities often seem to talk past one another. Conservative groups focus on matters such as abortion and gay marriage, while liberals stress questions of economic justice and war and peace. There is some convergence on pornography and gambling and, increasingly, environmental stewardship. All would do well to guard against the human tendency to address only those questions and heed only those teachings that we find convenient or comfortable.

Some selective judgment is inevitable, however, whether we are dealing with the codes of Leviticus or the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount. Much depends on how we read and understand the Bible—referencing scriptural commands, for example, as opposed to heeding the admonitions throughout the prophets and the New Testament to attend less to the minutiae of the law and more to its “weightier matters . . . justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Relating faith and politics is not merely a matter of obeying commands; it requires ongoing efforts to mine the riches of our religious traditions and to apply them to new and challenging circumstances.

Faith-based Constraints

Even as our faith prompts passionate engagement in the political arena, it also raises warnings and suggests constraints on the form and content of our advocacy. Two constraints written into the U.S. Constitution—checks and balances among the major organs of government, and the First Amendment’s twin prohibitions of the “establishment” of religion or the prevention of its “free exercise”—have deep religious roots and continuing significance in terms of our understanding of human nature and religious liberty.

James Madison’s reflections on the “interior structures of the government” reveal a persistent streak of Calvinism in this son of the Enlightenment:

What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men . . . you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. (*Federalist*, no. 51)

This view, interpreted by Reinhold Niebuhr as a landmark expression of “Christian realism,” must be distinguished from the more simplistic anti-power ideology that persistently rears its head in American politics. Government is hardly the only realm where power exists or can be abused; in fact, political power can be used to counter or control economic, military, or other kinds of power. We must attend not only to the dangers of strengthening a given organ of government but also to the powers and interests that might fill the vacuum if it is weakened. The

realism rooted in our religious traditions provides an awareness of the presence of self-interest and self-seeking in all human endeavors, the necessity to use power judiciously as we pursue the common good, and the need for checks and safeguards as we recognize the vulnerability of power in all realms to distortion and abuse.

The First Amendment also embodies religiously inspired constraints on engagement. By no means does it require a strict “privatization” of faith. But it does provide certain ground rules for relating religion to government. Religious conservatives often chafe at these ground rules and treat them as a secular imposition. People of faith need to understand and insist that, on the contrary, the First Amendment has deep and firm religious roots. A brief look at the lineage of the establishment clause will reveal that Roger Williams and other proponents of church-state separation were far more focused on the church’s integrity than on the state’s prerogatives. What was and still is at stake is not only civil liberty but also religious faithfulness.

The First Amendment and the tension between the establishment and free exercise clauses have been at issue in debates over President Bush’s “faith-based initiative.” Such initiatives—congregationally sponsored HUD housing for the elderly, for example, and Meals on Wheels—flourished in my district for many years before the Bush administration. I thought Democrats should have been more vocal in welcoming the President to the cause. But there was also good reason to voice concern about the ground rules. Religious organizations have historically taken pains—often by administering their social services through a legally distinct entity—to avoid using federal funds for sectarian purposes and to ensure against discrimination in hiring and the choice of beneficiaries. This is what Bush sought to alter, and it helps explain the difficulties the initiative encountered in the Senate and the courts.

Finally, our religious traditions teach us humility, and that too should shape and constrain our politics. This is the point of the familiar story of Abraham Lincoln’s response during the Civil War to a clergyman who expressed the hope that the Lord was on the side of the Union (in other words, “God Bless America”). “I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right,” Lincoln said. “But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord’s side.”

This anecdote, like Lincoln’s masterful Second Inaugural address, draws on a religious understanding central to the Jewish and Christian faiths: our

own will and striving are always subject to God’s judgment, even—perhaps especially—when we are most confident we are doing God’s will. This does not mean that we engage less vigorously; after all, Lincoln was relentlessly pursuing a military victory. But he did voice what Reinhold Niebuhr termed a “religious reservation”: a recognition that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone and a refusal to presume an absolute identification between his own cause and God’s will.

“Like ‘God-fearing’ people of all ages,” Niebuhr wrote, “[we] are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire.” Note that, once again, the most powerful argument against religious and political pretension is not secular but theological. Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.

So let us engage: our country needs and our faith requires our full-throated advocacy. We can engage far more effectively by taking explicit account of the faith traditions that provide most Americans with their moral frames of reference. This is partly a matter of communicating effectively, but even more of understanding what is required of us as heirs to these riches. A more deeply rooted politics will enable us to make a more authentic and persuasive case for a just society, even as it equips us to resist political arrogance and pretension and to defend the American constitutional order.

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Sign outside grocery store, Hobbs, N.M., 1942 (John Vachon, photographer)

Reclaiming America's True Power

By Gary Hart

A great deal of the more than forty years I've spent in public service, off and on, has been dedicated to consideration of America's constitutional principles derived from our republican founding and heritage. Particularly, I've thought about how those principles and ideals condition our foreign policy, how we relate to the rest of the world.

Those principles both provide great power and, at the same time, condition our behavior. Great nations traditionally possess three powers: economic, political, and military. I've called America's founding principles our "fourth power" (*The Fourth Power: A Grand Strategy for the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford University Press, 2004).

These principles that define our fourth power include equality, freedom, and justice. They commit us to the rule of law and an independent judiciary, gender and racial equality, freedom of political expression and a free press, the sovereignty of the people, the sanctity of private property, and other freedoms and liberties. Prior to 1789, few if any nations had incorporated these principles into a written constitution, and no nation has claimed them for the 220 years that we have.

As a child of evangelical Christianity and a student at Yale Divinity School, I have considered the correlation between these principles and our Judeo-Christian heritage. Periodically, including in recent years, political efforts are made to claim that our principles derive directly from our Christian heritage. Though I reject the motivations of those making these claims and insist on protecting the church and the state from each other with Jeffersonian rigor, there is something to this.

At their noblest, America's ideals incorporated into our Constitution derive in some degree from both Judaism and Christianity's claims concerning the worth of the individual, the uniqueness of the

human spirit, respect for law, insistence on justice in both its legal and social sense, and respect for human life. Our ethical systems and our moral imperatives derive from these traditions. Even so, we insist that our national charter is a secular, not a religious, document.

When I consider, however, how these principles influence our national conduct in the world and whether that conduct resonates or offends, I also reflect on the fact that resonance, the positive communication of our actions and motives to others, occurs partly because of the tenets of other faiths and religions as well. Some consider our religious heritage superior. But even the most amateur of students of world religions knows that many themes contained in our Judeo-Christian heritage are embraced in varying degrees by the rest of the world's major religions both Western and Eastern.

In other words, when America lives up to its constitutionally mandated principles and ideals we behave in ways that others expect and respect. Further, having incorporated many of these principles into our national charter, we have exceeded almost all other nations in stating who we are and what we believe. When we live up to our stated ideals, we gain moral authority—the "fourth power."

Alas, the reverse is also true. Our lofty principles and ideals condition our behavior. During the Cold War and the "war on terrorism," we have compromised and occasionally abandoned our ideals in the interest of expediency. The enemy of our en-

emy, regardless of that nation's conduct, became our friend. In the name of promoting democracy, we have consorted with dictators, oligarchs, and repressive governments. We have overthrown uncooperative governments. We have attempted to assassinate foreign leaders. Congress recently gave the president the authority to suspend the right of habeas corpus, the principle most central to the rule of law. We have confined prisoners for years without due process of law and we have tortured them.

It is inconceivable that our political leaders cannot know the damage in loss of respect and the subsequent sacrifice of moral authority this behavior causes us. No American with an ounce of sense can believe that this conduct, even when carried out in the name of "promoting democracy," goes without notice in an age of information. Of course, we make no claims to perfection. But hypocrisy is the space between what one claims and how one behaves. By that standard too often Noble America has permitted itself to become Great Hypocrite.

Our principles and ideals do not require us to sacrifice our security in their interest. Indeed, the greatest challenge the United States faces in the early twenty-first century is to achieve the highest possible degree of national security without sacrificing its principles. This is difficult, but properly managed it is not impossible.

It requires us to seek at home and abroad the common interest, the common good, and the commonwealth. It requires us to create what I would call the security of the global commons.

This goal cannot be achieved through unilateral or preemptive warfare. It cannot be achieved by threat and intimidation. It can be done by adopting the only successful counterterrorism strategy in modern history—isolation of the terrorists from the larger community. The security of this larger community, the global commons, now being the world, requires utmost cooperation between all nations, including Russia and China, similarly threatened. Organizing the global commons will be achieved by diplomacy, not coercion. At the moment we are preoccupied with coercion and its many prices, at the expense of world-class and moral diplomacy.

The late George Kennan, a true statesman and author of the famous "X telegram" sixty years ago (and rewritten for *Foreign Affairs*) that became the basis for containment of communism, wrote in that historic article: "To avoid destruction, the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a nation."

Our principles, our national claim for self-definition, contain a strength beyond that which our superior military and giant economy provide. They ennoble us. They resonate throughout the world. They invite respect. They give us, when we live up to them, moral authority in the world.

There are two sides to the coin of American citizenship: the rights of a democracy and the duties of a republic. In recent times we have claimed our rights without performing our duties. I can state my political philosophy in one sentence: we must earn our rights by performance of our duties. Among those duties is the exercise of civic virtue, citizen participation in the public affairs of the day. No duty is more important than the careful selection of our leaders.

At stake is not which candidate is highest in the polls or has raised the most money or has the cleverest advisers. At stake is the restoration of America's moral authority in the world, its stature, and its nobility.

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SURVEY

Diversifying The Presidential Field

A national poll reports that Americans say they are willing to vote for a Roman Catholic, a woman, an African American or a Hispanic, but less likely to vote for a Mormon.

The same poll said Americans are more likely to vote for a homosexual presidential candidate than an atheist.

The survey can be compared to a similar poll taken in 1937. Today, 92 percent of voters say they could vote for a Jewish candidate. In 1937 it was 46 percent. Also, 95 percent said they could vote for a Catholic today. It was 60 percent in 1937.

Source: USA Today/Gallup, a survey of 1,006 adults in February 2007.

Winning the Unwinnable Culture Wars

by Jennifer Butler

The culture wars have dogged me at work and in my personal life for two decades. Christmas holidays have provided the occasion for some knock-down-drag-outs with my conservative relatives and in-laws. After some tearful fights I got better at “winning” those debates, or at least holding my own over the years, but found them profoundly dissatisfying.

My first strategy in these battles was: no compromises—fight to make sure my side won while staying ideologically pure. The culture wars began as I was coming of age. I was in high school during the eighties and was preoccupied with the prospect of nuclear Armageddon and surviving to adulthood. I decided to become an active Christian because Jesus had a lot to say about peace and justice. That conversion in a sense made me a “born-again Christian,” but in another way—with my focus on justice—made me a bit of an anomaly. I was a fish out of water in my private Christian prep school in Atlanta, growing up during the Reagan eighties when most Bible-belt Christians began wedding their faith to the Republican Party. My efforts to educate my private school classmates about the dangers of nuclear buildup proved fruitless.

So later when I went to seminary and found an ideological sanctuary in liberation and feminist theology, I was determined never to “go home” again. Finally I had the words to describe my faith and a community that shared my values! I felt safe. That worked for a while—that is, until I ended up in an interfaith marriage. I married an evangelical—after seven years of debating him, of course. Luckily he had a sense of humor and an ability to see through my need to be right. Neither one of us ever won outright, but somehow we found ourselves in each other. Our debates became a constant reminder to me that no one has all the answers, and neither side of an ideological battle is absolutely right.

My professional life has taken me to the epicenter of the culture wars. I've watched conservative-liberal battles in denominational meetings, at the U.N., and now in our nation's capital and state legislatures. In the end, the culture wars' deepest impact has been to shut down intelligent debate and thus progress on the significant issues of our time.

One day, in a U.N. lobby, I found myself leaving my liberal activist enclave (we were advocating for reproductive health services to be provided for youth) to go and talk to a Mormon conservative activist, who was about my age. Two camps kept vigil outside the assembly hall—feminists on one side, the Christian right on the other. The two groups were intensely aware of one another even as we made it a policy to ignore each other.

I sat on the floor with this Mormon woman, situated between the two camps, and as we talked I realized we weren't as different as our ideologies insisted. I felt the eyes of my colleagues on my back, as I'm sure she did too. In that short moment we each tried to break through what we knew were our stereotypes of each other. We did a lot in five minutes until a senior organizer on the conservative side began to circle us nervously, so we broke up our conversation. Though our strategies differed, we both could agree that women and girls around the world were suffering, and we both wanted that to change. But neither side was about to let us have that conversation.

U.N. delegates eventually came to some agreement that particular week on issues of children's rights. But I was brushing my teeth that night trying to figure out whether my side won or not when I suddenly reached a conclusion that would change my activism. I kept tallying up the score card—nothing added up. On issue after issue, both right and left declared victory to their constituents, in the press, and no doubt to their funders. Yet neither had finally won—government commitments to reproductive health were neither advanced nor retracted. The only winner: chaos and inaction, as the meeting degenerated into culture-war diatribes on a global scale. Nearly every battle I fought in those first five years of my tenure at the Presbyterian U.N. Office ended the same way.

In a polarized landscape, where paralysis rules the day, what does it mean to win? How does one advance justice, human rights, and the common good in a climate of partisanship?

The Culture Wars' Demise?

I was even more discouraged at the role of religion in so many of these conflicts. The voice of intolerance was on the rise while more moderate and progressive voices were fading, leaving a vacuum in debate. My own faith tradition had much to contribute to civic discourse, but it only continued to lose its voice and prominence in American society.

I had nearly thrown in the towel when I heard about a new initiative around faith and public life. Forty faith leaders had gathered in Washington, D.C., after the 2004 elections to address the Christian right's dominance of the values debate, a dominance that was bound to continue so long as others failed to assert an alternative vision. They vowed to develop stronger organizing strategies and coalitions around values shared by Catholics, evangelicals, mainliners, Muslims, and Jews. To realize these goals, the organizers created Faith in Public Life, a resource center for faith leaders seeking to reclaim the values debate.

Faith in Public Life launched in January 2006 and now provides media and organizing strategies for faith leaders, support for journalists and secular partners seeking to connect with faith leaders, and a Web hub for faith movements working for justice and the common good (www.faithinpubliclife.org). FPL's "Mapping Faith" identified 3,000 faith organizations in all fifty states working for the common good. In red states or blue, faith organizations are combating poverty, speaking out for peace, and protecting the environment.

One is as likely to come across a religious group working for creation care in Oklahoma as in Oregon. Though culture war makes good fodder for talk shows, it misses the shared values that unite faithful Americans across regional and partisan differences. Religion is so often reported to be at the center of a polarized society, yet FPL's map reveals that faith leaders are potentially at the heart of the solution.

Here is where I see some hope. First, moderate and progressive faith leaders are reasserting themselves in public life, offering the nation a different model for civic discourse on values. For instance, We Believe Ohio (www.webelieveohio.com), a coalition of hundreds of moderate and progressive clergy, reclaimed the Ohio values debate in 2006 by using new strategies. Muslims, Christians, and Jews spoke with an unapologetic voice of their faith while demonstrating tolerance and respect for pluralism and separation of church and state.

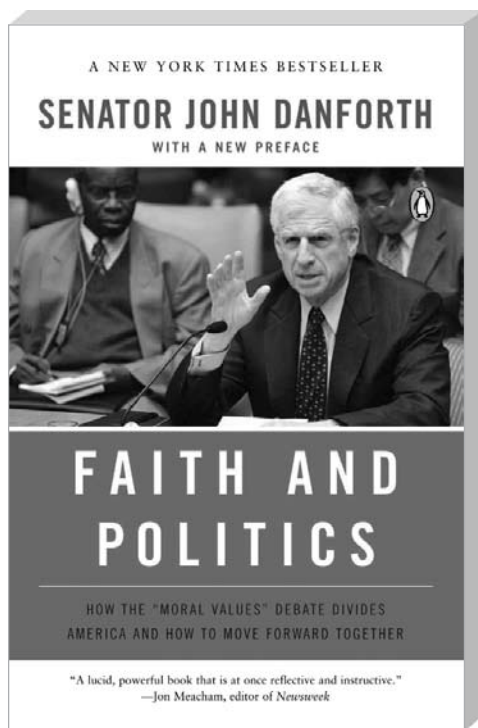
Second, diverse coalitions that include conservatives and liberals are uniting to address issues like the genocide in Darfur, the U.S. use of torture, climate change, poverty, AIDS, and sex trafficking. Conservative evangelicals in particular have gone out on a limb, ignoring threats and attacks from Christian right leaders. Through these efforts, new relationships are being forged and trust built to address issues that liberals and conservatives strongly disagree on, like abortion, family, and marriage. Evangelicals like Rob Bell at Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan and Joel Hunter of Northland Church in Florida are preaching sermons that would knock the socks off any good liberal. Even as religion has polarized civic debates in recent decades, it now has the potential to pull people together.

In the past year I've caught a glimpse of the culture wars' possible decline. The war is already ending when scores of leaders take walks across lobbies—despite the eyes on their backs. As my staff reaches out to unlikely allies, we have been surprised that there seems no limit to how far we might go. Perhaps these new alliances are helped because of a changing of the guard—a new generation sick of the culture wars and willing to try something new. One thing is clear: there's no end to creative possibilities that emerge when one sits down with those who view things differently.

Jennifer Butler is a Presbyterian Church (USA) minister who has been the Executive Director of Faith in Public Life in Washington, D.C. since 2005. From 1996 to 2005 she served as the Presbyterian Church (USA) representative to the United Nations. She is the author of *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

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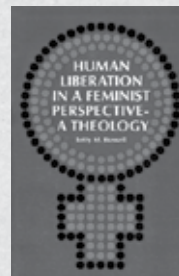
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From the Editor: May Day

By Ray Waddle



During the Divinity School's Faith and Citizenship conference last May, something unexpected happened.

Near the end of the event, at the morning worship service in Marquand Chapel, people were in tears.

The trigger for this surge of moistened eyes (mine included) was the hymn we sang before the benediction. "This Is My Song," set to Sibelius's *Finlandia*, sneaks up on its victims. Escorted by the tune's dignified cadences are the words, written in the 1930s by Lloyd Stone, including:

*This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

And ...

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on clover-leaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh, hear my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

The lyrics unleashed such emotion, I suspect, because they touched a deep dream that many quietly harbor—not just a dream of peace, but an empathy for nameless others that transcends the prerogatives of nationhood, a dream of affectionate community inspired by the gospel. For the record, we can't normally concede that other peoples might have dreams as legitimate as ours. Nationalist pride makes any such concession unpatriotic, dangerous in a time of war. Surely no politician in an election year (or any other) could risk singing "This Is My Song" on a public stage.

But on that May morning, a hymn briefly made solidarity with the dream. Earlier, the conference's panels and keynoters had probed the intricate interplay of theology and nationalism, faith and public life, in this era of ritual polarization and ideological religion. Perhaps the heartache at worship time came because we citizens feel trapped by our jittery, aggressive public rhetoric, hesitant to speak a song's pan-humanistic notions aloud. The hymn's internationalism reminds us how parochial our locally

realized paradigms are—the media's incapacity, or the church's unwillingness, to rise above apocalyptic fears or prayers for preserving strictly our own way of life. The tears that morning registered a sense of loss, the squandering of good will at the hands of workaday anxiety and distrust. Instead, we cope with a debilitating daily contradiction: political fear runs neck and neck with the gospel message of reconciliation.

But there may be gain at least in the acknowledgment of loss. It measures the grief that people of faith carry for the failure of their ideals. The grief can define a way forward. This issue of *Reflections* explores some of those ideals—the meaning of citizenship in a globalized world, the responsibilities of Christian faith in democratic life, the prospect for truth-telling and religious humility in the public realm—against the battering pressures of 24/7 news, political expediency, the temptations of power.

The photos you find in these pages provide a parallel narrative, a glimpse at the past, the ways religion declared itself in public life in the 1930s and '40s. The pictures at first suggest a frictionless time when the American landscape was less crowded—fewer viewpoints, fewer religions. But no doubt this "simpler time" was not how people experienced life then. It was a moment of great conflict, deprivation, and uncertainty. Hitler and Stalin were rising menaces abroad, while deep worry at home confronted Americans with the prospect that their economic system was failing in the Great Depression.

The photos in this edition of *Reflections* were selected from the vast gallery of photographs sponsored by the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s and preserved by the Library of Congress. The project, overseen by the federal Farm Security Administration, recruited accomplished photographers in the cause of illuminating the daily life and faith practices of Americans in a time of economic upheaval and social dislocation.

Several photos shown here are featured in the fascinating 2004 book *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* by scholar Colleen McDannell (Yale University Press). The book tells the neglected story of the project and the photographers who elevated a government assignment to artistic permanence. The author ponders the ways religion penetrated public life two generations ago, as witnessed and perceived by some remarkable photographers. The government's aim was to shore

up enthusiasm for President Roosevelt's New Deal by highlighting the routines and the dignity of ordinary citizens who had otherwise been ignored by the nation's powerbrokers.

"Religion" seventy years ago meant Christianity, with Judaism shyly on the periphery. The government photos capture the last moments in America before the unstoppable diversity after World War II changed the nation's thinking about civic fairness, equality before the law, and the marketplace of spiritual truth. Ever since, faith and citizenship have been circling each other—testing each other—in the arenas of courtroom, classroom, sanctuary, and public opinion. Happily, the complicated issues are sometimes clarified by thoughtful, feisty panelists at a Yale conference; other times, by sudden tears in a worship setting.

CREDITS

Photography

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FSA-OWI Collection (call numbers LC-USF34- 060110-D; LC-USF34- 021993-C; LC-USW3- 016114-C; LC-USF34- 056459-D; LC-USF34-055314-D; LC-USF34- 043925-D; LC-USF34- 082380-D; LC-USW3- 056230-E; LC-USW3- 031404-D; LC-USF34- 060518-D; LC-USW3-011993-D)

Picturing Fourth: Photography and the Great Depression

by Colleen McDannell (Yale University Press, 2004)

Poetry

Louis Simpson, a Jamaican-born U.S. poet and critic, won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for *At the End of the Open Road*.

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Carl Dennis, writer-in-residence at State University of New York, Buffalo, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for *Practical Gods*.

"Our Generation," reprinted by permission of the author; it appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *The Best American Poetry 2006* and in his new volume, *Unknown Friends*, published by Penguin.

Jeanne Murray Walker teaches at the University of Delaware. Her most recent book of poetry is *A Deed to the Light*.

"Anger" and "Take Heart" by Jeanne Murray Walker, reprinted by permission of the author and Gettysburg Press.

English poet **Geoffrey Hill** is the author of *Tenebrae*, *The Triumph of Love* and other books of poetry, including a new volume, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, published by Yale University Press.

"Christmas Trees," from *New and Collected Poems 1952-1992* by Geoffrey Hill. Copyright © 1994 by Geoffrey Hill. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Co. All rights reserved.

Wisława Szymborska, born in Poland, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996 for her poetry.

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Billy Collins, who teaches at Lehman College of the City University of New York, was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001-2003.

"Red in Claw," reprinted by permission of the author.

William Stafford was a celebrated poet, teacher and mentor until his death in 1993.

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A RITUAL TO READ TO EACH OTHER

by William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.





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