

The Democrats Embrace God: An Unqualified Blessing?

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Abstract

Since the rise of the religious right in the 1980s, the Republican party has been the political party most closely associated with the language of religion, morality, and family values. After the 2004 elections, however, many Democratic candidates have been embracing the language of religion, engaging in personal faith testimonies and attempting to reframe the notion of ‘morality’ within political discourse. Along with liberal religious activists, these Democrats argue that faith testimonies are appropriate within the public realm and that true religious (Christian) values are inherent in social issues such as fighting poverty and providing universal healthcare.

This paper attempts to assess the Democratic prospects for electoral success with this approach by unpacking the elements of the liberal religious strategy and speculating as to its possible positive and negative effects on gaining votes. Some swing voters who embrace the Democratic economic agenda but are uncomfortable with rigid secularism may respond to this strategy and vote for Democrats. But the secular base of the party may well be so distressed at the turn toward ‘God talk’ that they withdraw from active support. At the root of the Democrats’ dilemma are competing beliefs over the appropriate role for religion in political discourse.

In recent decades, the Republican party and conservative religious activists have presented themselves as protectors of moral and religious values.¹ Evidence of this, they say, is their policies relating to sexual behavior, marriage, and the family, including opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.² Republican candidates and public officials openly speak of their religious beliefs and the influence of those beliefs on public policy. In response, those voters who attend church regularly have been overwhelmingly likely to vote for Republicans, and polling results have fairly consistently demonstrated that the public identifies the Republican party as more strongly associated with ‘moral values.’ Because Republicans dominated Congress, the Presidency, state legislatures, and governorships for a number of years (even when numerous voters seemed to favor Democratic economic policies), many Democrats focused on the difficulty they have in presenting themselves as a party of strong values whose members are motivated by religious beliefs. Since the 2004 elections, Democrats have been embracing the language of religion, engaging in personal faith testimonies and

¹ For an excellent overview of the rise of the religious right, see Clyde Wilcox, *God’s Warriors: The Christian Right in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992) and *Onward Christian Soldiers: The Christian Right in American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

² See John C. Green, Kimberly H. Conger, and James L. Guth, “Agents of Value: Christian Right Activists in 2004,” in *The Values Campaign: the Christian Right and the 2004 Elections*, eds. John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox, 22-55 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006); and Clyde

attempting to reframe the ‘morality’ debate. Along with liberal religious activists, many Democrats maintain that true religious (Christian) values are inherent in social issues such as fighting poverty and providing universal healthcare.

Because Democrats’ contemporary use of the language of faith is very recent, there has been little time for academics to explore its consequences. Likewise, the political movement dubbed the ‘religious left’ has not been adequately defined or analyzed. This paper is a preliminary attempt to assess the Democrats’ prospects for electoral success with their focus on ‘God talk’ by unpacking the elements of the liberal religious strategy and speculating as to its possible positive and negative effects on gaining votes.

I. Why the Democrats ‘Got Religion’

The defeat of John Kerry and other Democratic candidates in November of 2004 caused a great deal of ‘soul searching’ (literally) within the Democratic party. George Bush appeared vulnerable in the months before the election; public opinion seemed to be turning against the Republican domestic agenda and was increasingly skeptical about the war in Iraq.³ When the party lost close races, including the presidency, everyone looked for an explanation. There was a quick answer emerging from the exit polls: ‘moral values.’ Twenty-two percent of the electorate polled claimed that ‘moral values’ was the issue most important to them. Given the fact that referenda on same-sex marriage appeared on ballots in a number of crucial states, the immediate story circulating after the election was that the citizenry cared more deeply about the family/sex issues highlighted by the Republican party than they did about the economy, terrorism, the environment, or any of the issues on which Republicans might be vulnerable. Therefore, went the conventional wisdom, the Democrats lost because their party does not embrace the moral values held dear by the majority of Americans.⁴

Wilcox, Linda M. Merolla, and David Beer, “Saving Marriage by Banning Marriage: The Christian Right Finds a New Issue in 2004,” in *The Values Campaign* (see above), 56-78.

³ J. Brian Atwood and Lawrence R. Jacobs, “Rare for an Election Year: In 2004, Foreign Policy Matters,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 22, 2004, 9; Adam Nagourney, “Polls Show Tight Race with a Few Gains for Kerry,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2004, A1-A17; Richard Dunham, Alexandra Starr and Lee Walczak, “Suddenly He’s Vulnerable,” *Business Week*, Mar. 24, 2003, 36-37.

⁴ Jane Lampman, “A ‘Moral Voter’ Majority? The Culture Wars Are Back,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 8, 2004, 4; Joshua Muravcik, “Why the Democrats Keep Losing,” *Commentary*, Jan. 2005, 21-31.

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In addition, commentators credited the Republican victory to the massive mobilization of evangelical voters. By turning out the party's base in record numbers, went this claim, Bush was able to win key states. This explanation, of course, was related to moral values. The evangelical base was motivated more by social issues than economic ones, and their record turnout validated the story that Republicans were tapping into the deep moral concerns of the public through their opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion.⁵

There was quickly a reaction against this narrative as by some informed observers who argued that the moral values thesis was, at the very least, overstated and simplistic. The exit poll question was vaguely worded and few respondents would have volunteered it as an answer had the pollsters not suggested it as an option.⁶ The narrative of miraculous evangelical turnout was likewise exaggerated.⁷ Nonetheless, there was reliable evidence that 'moral values,' however loosely defined, tipped the 2004 vote in crucial states⁸ and that Democrats continued to be vulnerable in this area. For example, survey research by the Pew Research Center done in the months before the 2006 election indicated that 69% of those polled believed that liberals were "too secular," and only 26% found the Democratic party "friendly to religion."⁹ And though respondents were concerned about attempts by conservatives to impose their religious values on others, the public was "more critical of what it sees as efforts by the political left to diminish the influence of religion in government and the schools."¹⁰ It is thus understandable that some Democrats, both strategically and sincerely, turned their attention to the 'moral values problem,' and inevitably, to religion. If Democrats are seen as antagonistic to the

⁵ John C. Green and Mark Silk, "Why Moral Values Did Count," *Religion in the News*, Spring 2005, 5-8.

⁶ Edward Ashbee, "The 2004 Presidential Election, 'Moral Values,' and the Democrats' Dilemma," *The Political Quarterly*, 76 no. 2 (2005): 213; Emmett H. Buell, Jr., "Review Essay: The 2004 Elections," *The Journal of Politics*, 69 no. 2 (2007): 581; Adolph Reed Jr., "The 2004 Election in Perspective: The Myth of 'Cultural Divide' and the Triumph of Neoliberal Ideology," *American Quarterly* 57 no 1 (2005): 1-15; in general, *The Values Campaign? The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections*, eds. John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

⁷ Reed, "2004 Election," 3; Muravcik, "Democrats," 21-31.

⁸ Mark J. Rozell and Debasree Das Gupta, "'The Values Vote'? Moral Issues and the 2004 Elections," in *The Values Campaign? The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections*, eds. John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox 11-21 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006); Scott Keeter, "Evangelicals and Moral Values," in *A Matter of Faith: Religion in the 2004 Presidential Election*, ed. David E. Campbell 80-92 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

⁹ The Pew Research Center For the People & The Press, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Press Release*, Aug. 24, 2006.

religious and moral values associated with Christian faith groups, they said, the party must turn around that perception.

II. The New Strategy

A. Response of Democrats. As the new chair of the Democratic Party, Howard Dean emphasized the need to reach out to religious voters. By the middle of 2006 he had met with liberal evangelical minister Jim Wallis, appeared on Pat Robertson's "700 Club" and hired staff to coordinate outreach efforts.¹¹ Nancy Pelosi, then House Minority Leader, organized the Democratic Faith Working Group and encouraged Democrats to express policy positions in biblical terms. Senator Harry Reid organized a "faith summit."¹² John Podesta, President Clinton's Chief of Staff, founded the Center for American Progress and started a "Faith and Progressive Policy" initiative by holding discussions on moral values, faith, and political institutions in cities throughout the U.S.¹³ Mike McCurry¹⁴ and William Galston,¹⁵ also former members of the Clinton administration, added their voices to the we-have-religion chorus through writing, organizing, and speaking engagements.

These efforts became widespread in the months leading up to the 2006 elections. The Michigan Democratic Party revised its platform after discussions with hundreds of clergy. The revision included language on "the common good" and the need to attend to all citizens, including the sick, the poor, "The First. The Last."¹⁶ Liberal religious groups in a number of states worked with the Democratic party to mobilize the vote behind minimum wage referenda.¹⁷ Political consultant Mara Vanderslice and her firm, Common

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ruth Marcus, "The New Temptation of Democrats," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2006, A17.

¹² Dan Gilgoff, "The Politics of Faith," *U.S. News & World Report*, July 25, 2005, 26-7.

¹³ William Katerberg, "Can Democrats Get Religion?" *Christian Century*, Dec. 27, 2005, 9-10.

¹⁴ Daniel Burke, Devin Eckstrom and Peter Sachs, "With the Help of a Dozen, Democrats 'Get Religion,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 27, 2006, 13.

¹⁵ John Heilemann, "God Dem; Falwell's Death Points to a New Reality: The Religious Vote, For the First Time in Decades, Is Up For Grabs," *New York Magazine*, May 28, 2007.

¹⁶ David Kirkpatrick, "In Ohio, Democrats Show A Religious Side to Voters," *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2006, 20.

¹⁷ Catherine Candisky and Alan Johnson, "Religious Liberals Join Forces For Political Comeback," *The Columbus Dispatch* [Ohio], Aug. 13, 2006, 1A; Jeff Diamant, "They Mix Religion and Liberalism," *The Star-Ledger* [Newark, NJ], Aug. 1, 2006, 28.

Good Strategies, pushed numerous Democratic candidates to testify to their religious faith, buy spots on Christian radio, and meet with conservative clergy.¹⁸

The Democrats' outreach to faith groups has increased since the 2006 elections. Supporters of this strategy point to the electoral successes of Democrats who spoke openly of faith during their campaigns. Timothy M. Kaine, the Democrat who won the gubernatorial race in Virginia, openly spoke of his devout Roman Catholicism throughout his campaign. Not only did he speak of his faith, he also directly linked his religious views to his political positions, particularly his opposition to the death penalty.¹⁹ Ted Strickland of Ohio, a former Methodist minister, also won a governor's seat by attesting that "'biblical principles' would guide him in office" and campaigning on a Christian radio station.²⁰ Bob Casey, a Democrat who has long opposed abortion rights for religious reasons, won the Senate seat in Pennsylvania. Inexact data from exit polling in Ohio and Pennsylvania indicated the Democrats picked up 20 percent more Catholic voters in 2006 than 2004; in Pennsylvania, they gained an additional 11 percent of the Catholic vote.²¹ Also in 2006, the Democratic candidates using Vanderslice's "Common Good Strategies" did approximately 10 points better than did Democratic candidates nationally.²²

Prominent retired office holders are included in the chorus of "God talk." Jimmy Carter²³ and Kathleen Kennedy Townshend²⁴ have written books exhorting Democrats to reclaim liberal religious activism. For example, Townshend's book, *Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way*, is somewhat mistitled. Rather than fulminating against faith groups' involvement in politics, she in fact applauds this American tradition. Her criticism is levied instead at the political issues championed by the most outspoken faith groups. Townshend decries the attention paid to abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage by evangelical

¹⁸ Kirkpatrick, "In Ohio."

¹⁹ James Dao, "A Democrat of Faith Turns Tables," *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2005, 23.

²⁰ Kirkpatrick, "In Ohio."

²¹ Laurie Goodstein, "Religious Voting Data Show Some Shift, Observers Say," *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2006, 7.

²² Kirkpatrick, "In Ohio."

²³ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

²⁴ Kathleen Kennedy Townshend, *Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way* (New York: Warner Books, 2007).

Protestants and conservative Catholics. In her view the focus of these groups is restricted to personal salvation through moral behavior and ignores Christian obligation to one's fellow humans. She urges religious groups to reclaim progressive political traditions that seek social and economic justice for all.

B. The Religious Left Weighs In.²⁵ It is important to note that Democrats who are 'talking God' are not doing so unilaterally. Prominent religious leaders and activist faith groups have been pushing the liberal/left to engage the language of faith and moral values. Most well known is Jim Wallis, evangelical Protestant and founder of the organization/magazine *Sojourners*. His best-selling book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*,²⁶ urges the country to eschew both radical secularism and rightwing Christianity by focusing political discourse on Jesus' embrace of peace and social justice. Similarly, Rabbi Michael Lerner of the liberal Jewish journal *Tikkun* and author of *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*,²⁷ says that Democrats must see beyond secular economic issues and embrace a spiritual perspective on policy issues. Policies should be judged, he argues, by whether they "maximize love and caring, kindness and generosity, compassion and creativity, and enhance our capacities to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred and to the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement."²⁸ Lifelong Catholic, former seminarian, and political activist Bill Press likewise exhorts the Democrats to reconnect with the understanding that Christianity is not synonymous with a conservative social agenda in his impassioned polemic *How the Republicans Stole Christmas: Why the*

²⁵ It is with imprecision that I, and most others, use the term "religious left." The movement's vocal appearance on the contemporary political stage is so recent that it has yet to be consistently defined/analyzed with great specificity. For the purposes of this paper, it is loosely (and tautologically, perhaps) defined as religious activists who support policies that are conventionally defined as "liberal." These activists include mainline Protestants, Reform Jews, Catholics, and some self-defined "evangelicals." I do note that much of the language of the religious left is Christocentric, often asking, "what would Jesus do?" For an excellent attempt to analyze further the religious and political beliefs of the religious left, see Lyman A. Kellstedt, Corwin E. Smidt, John C. Green, and James L. Guth, "A Gentle Stream or a 'River Glorious'? The Religious Left in the 2004 Election," *A Matter of Faith: Religion in the 2004 Presidential Election*, ed. David E. Campbell 232-256 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

²⁶ Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

²⁷ Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

²⁸ Michael Lerner, "A Spiritual Caucus in the Democratic Party," *Tikkun*, 21, May/June 2006, 12-14.

*Religious Right is Wrong about Faith and Politics and What We Do to Make It Right.*²⁹ In *Jesus Rode a Donkey: Why Republicans Don't Have the Corner on Christ*, Protestant theologian Linda Seger methodically walks through the “hot button” issues of abortion, same-sex marriage, war, and governmental dishonesty, skewering the Bush administration and explaining why a true understanding of Christian faith leads one into the Democratic party.³⁰ Also in the competition for the catchiest (or longest) title in this category are Robin Meyers’s *Why the Christian Right is Wrong: A Minister’s Manifesto for Taking Back Your Faith, Your Flag, Your Future*³¹ and Randall Balmer’s *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical’s Lament*.³² With the exceptions of Michael Lerner and Bill Press, these books are written mainly by Protestant clergy who fall under the label ‘mainline’ or ‘liberal evangelical.’ Though there is not unanimity in their views (for example, Jim Wallis is antiabortion while Linda Seger is pro-choice), their approaches to contemporary political discourse and policy preferences are fairly similar. It is important now to explore the primary themes/strategies/claims made by these authors and by the Democratic politicians who comprise the religious left.

III. Elements of Liberal Religious ‘God Talk’

Though different commentators and politicians have variations of ‘God talk,’ four themes continually resurface: (A.) willingness to engage in personal testimony of their religious beliefs; (B.) rejection of extreme secularism; (C.) criticism of the views and actions of the religious right; and (D.) attempts to reframe the debate over the content of morality. I will now consider these elements and the problems they pose for Democrats.

A. Personal Testimony. Consultants such as Mara Vanderslice are urging their clients to speak publicly of their faith and its impact on their political views. Embedded in this advice are several assumptions: that one’s religious faith is an appropriate topic for

²⁹ Bill Press, *How the Republicans Stole Religion: Why the Religious Right is Wrong about Faith and Politics and What We Can Do to Make It Right* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006).

³⁰ Linda Seger, *Jesus Rode a Donkey: Why Republicans Don't Have the Corner on Christ* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006).

³¹ Robin Meyers, *Why the Christian Right is Wrong: A Minister’s Manifesto for Taking Back Your Faith, Your Flag, Your Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

³² Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical’s Lament*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

public disclosure and discussion; that it is appropriate to base one's political positions on one's religious beliefs; and that voters will respond positively to these disclosures.

This last assumption—the political efficacy of ‘testifying’—is one that makes sense on its surface. A large majority of Americans believe in God, goes to worship services, and want more religion in the public sphere.³³ Politicians who have spoken openly and frequently of their faith (including Bill Clinton and George W. Bush) have been successful in gaining and retaining public office. ‘Morality’ and ‘religion’ are inextricably linked in most Americans’ minds, and they want moral people in office. Advising those who have a faith to share it openly thus seems like a no-brainer, and Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama do so frequently. For example, the two of them, along with John Edwards willingly appeared at a forum organized by the liberal religious group Sojourners. Televised by CNN, the forum allowed each of the candidates to speak at length of the roles religion and faith have played in their personal lives.³⁴ However, this strategy is fraught with peril because its efficacy completely turns on the perceived authenticity of the speaker.³⁵ If one is to do this successfully, one must appear to speak from the heart and with complete sincerity. Any indication of discomfort is easily interpreted as a lack of authentic belief and thus a cynical attempt to win votes by lying about matters of the deepest importance. In the same way that some politicians are comfortable before a camera and others not, and some generate charisma and some do not, some public figures can speak of religious beliefs in ways that appear authentic and others cannot. So when Edwards speaks of regaining his faith with the death of his son and his wife's cancer, is it a shrewd attempt to elicit sympathy or sincere narrative of belief reborn in the face of tragedy? Hillary Clinton's clear discomfort with referring to her religious beliefs and even her allusion to this discomfort might well reinforce the view that she makes no move without consulting the polls, even though she can honestly point to a lifetime of church attendance.

³³ Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 5th ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield: 2007) 10-12.

³⁴ Patrick Healy and Michael Luo, “Edwards, Clinton and Obama Describe Journeys of Faith,” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2007, 20.

³⁵ I am indebted to Rhys H. Williams, Professor of Sociology at University of Cincinnati, for his pointing out the importance of “personal authenticity” in religious testimony.

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The success Obama enjoys when testifying about his beliefs highlights the difficulty in recommending this strategy to all candidates. When Obama speaks of God and faith, he often adopts vocal cadences and inflections strongly associated with African American clergy and its long tradition of religious testimony. Though his background is culturally diverse and international (and he came later to his faith than did Mrs. Clinton), his presentation of self when speaking of God connects to a black American rhetoric that seems inescapably authentic, particularly to white audiences. White Americans can easily place Obama within the well-recognized template of ‘blacks emoting about religion’ and accept his words as genuine expressions of heartfelt, animating faith. George Bush II and Bill Clinton held similar advantages, for their southern accents and evangelical, born-again language fit into a familiar cultural niche. But public testimony has not been the recent practice of middleclass, mainline Protestants nor mainstream suburbanized Catholics. Consequently, Hillary Clinton and John Kerry (as well as Republicans John McCain and Rudy Giuliani) are disadvantaged when expected to speak publicly and convincingly about their faith. Thus the one-size-fits-all advice to campaign with one’s faith on one’s sleeve runs the risk of appearing manipulative and dishonest.

B. Rejection of Secularism. Implicit in the new strategy is a rejection of the view that religion and politics should not mix. Broadly speaking, this can refer to two different things: (1) that there should be a strict institutional/legal separation of church and state (which turns on one’s interpretation of the 1st amendment’s Establishment Clause); and/or (2) that personal religious beliefs should not intrude into political discourse, into one’s public duties, nor into the criteria for supporting or rejecting a candidate for public office.

(1) The question of constitutional interpretation is one that has been discussed and debated at length and in depth in numerous books, articles, and appellate cases. For the purposes of this article, suffice it to say that for the last several decades, the standard “liberal” position on the Establishment Clause has been one of suspicion of any governmental action that appears to endorse a particular religious tradition or even religion in general. Often referred to as the ‘separationist’ (as opposed to accommodationist’) position, it is perhaps best represented by Justice David Souter in his

concurrence in *Lee v. Weisman* (1992).³⁶ This position defines governmental neutrality toward religion as neutrality between religion and nonreligion. Any official sponsorship of religious activities or programs, such as prayers at graduation services, displays of the Ten Commandments in courthouses, or government funding of social services through faith groups are seen as violations of the Establishment Clause of the 1st Amendment. In the view of many liberals, this strict separation of church and state is necessary to prevent the government from appearing to support the beliefs of some citizens over others (typically those in the minority). This interpretation of the Establishment clause is now being questioned by some religious progressives as they embrace policies that blur the infamous ‘wall of separation.’ Like a number of other religious leaders, Jim Wallis initially supported President Bush’s ‘faith-based initiative,’ arguing it would help those in poverty. He continues to support school vouchers and attacks the liberal separationist organization Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Notably, Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Bill Richardson, John Edwards, and Joseph Biden all support some type of faith-based initiatives. Though they do continue to oppose organized prayer in public school and school vouchers,³⁷ there does appear to be increasing space for Democrats to reject some aspects of the rigid separation doctrine and move toward a modified accommodationist position. Indeed, many of the progressives espousing the new strategy believe the liberal insistence on proscribing anything approaching an endorsement of religious programs or institutions unnecessarily ties the hands of government and unfairly restricts the participation of faith groups in the political realm.³⁸

(2) The other dimension of the mantra ‘religion and politics don’t mix’ is the rejection of religious beliefs as an appropriate basis for political behavior and the rejection of religious claims as appropriate discourse in public policy. This position was most prominently staked out by then presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960³⁹

³⁶ *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992).

³⁷ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Religion and Politics ’08: The Candidates and Faith-Based Initiatives,” http://pewforum.org/religion08/compare.php?Issue=Faith__Based_Initiatives (accessed June 25, 2007)

³⁸ Dennis Hoover, “The Faith-Based Initiative Re-Ups,” *Religion in the News*, Spring 2005, 18-20, 24.

³⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks on Church and State,” Delivered to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Sept. 12, 1960, in *A Wall of Separation? Debating the Public Role of Religion*, eds. Mary C. Segers and Ted G. Jelen (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) 140-44.

and eloquently reiterated by Mario Cuomo in 1984.⁴⁰ It continues to be the position held by John Kerry, John Kennedy, and other pro-choice Catholics (including Republican Rudy Giuliani): personal religious beliefs should not dictate the stands one takes on public policy issues, particularly when those beliefs are not shared by large numbers of citizens.⁴¹ To do so runs the risk of imposing one's particular religious faith on unwilling citizens and to violate one's duty to the rule of law, they argue. By bringing religion into politics, one ignores both the Enlightenment value of rational discourse and the classical liberal separation of the private sphere of life from the public. Governor Cuomo summarized the position:

Our public morality then—the moral standards we maintain for everyone, not just the ones we insist on in our private lives—depends on a consensus view of right and wrong. The values derived from religious belief will not—and should not—be accepted as part of the public morality unless they are shared by the pluralistic community at large, by consensus.⁴²

Democrats in the Senate were pursuing this line of reasoning in the autumn of 2005 when they questioned potential federal judges about the content of their religious beliefs and whether those beliefs would influence their interpretation of the Constitution. What liberals were seeking, of course, were public assurances that conservative Catholics would follow the precedent of *Roe v. Wade* and not seek to overturn abortion rights due to their own religious opposition to abortion. (Conservatives then protested that the Democrats were violating Article VI of the Constitution by applying a 'religious test' that effectively discriminated against Catholics. As a number of commentators noted, however, the religious affiliations of several nominees had been touted by the Bush administration to assure the Christian right that the nominee was indeed personally ((and therefore, legally)) opposed to *Roe v. Wade*.⁴³ And beyond judicial nominations, it hardly

⁴⁰ Mario M. Cuomo, "Religious Belief and Public Morality: A Catholic Governor's Perspective," Address at the University of Notre Dame, September 13, 1984, in *A Wall of Separation?* (see note 39) 144-57.

⁴¹ This issue continues to provoke heated controversy among Roman Catholics. A number of prelates have taken the position that Catholic legislators must oppose all laws permitting abortion, or else be denied communion. This was a particular problem for John Kerry in 2004 and is currently one for Rudy Giuliani.

⁴² Cuomo, "Religious Belief," 149.

⁴³ Robin Toner, "Catholics and the Court," *The New York Times*, Aug. 7, 2005, Section 4, p. 4; Shailagh Murray, "Roberts Hearings Likely to Enter Religious Territory," *Washington Post*, Sept. 5, 2005, p. A06; "This 'Religious Test' Flunks," Editorial, *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, Oct. 10, 2005, B7; "Faith-Based Hypocrisy," Editorial, *Grand Rapids Press*, Oct. 12, 2005, A11

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needs mentioning that, in order to gain votes from its evangelical base, Republican candidates for elected office have had to present their religious bona fides for some time.)

But the standard Democratic position that public officials' religious faith is a matter for the private sphere and should not be touted as a source of policy positions is being repudiated by those espousing that liberals openly embrace faith. Clergy such as Jim Wallis and Michael Lerner are explicit on this point: they denounce the left for ignoring the spiritual aspect of policies and for insisting on a rigid separation of church and state in the public sphere. In an interview on PBS, Wallis explained:

There are also secular fundamentalists, people who have a disdain for religion, and many of those voices are in the Democratic Party. So religious people often feel alienated or disrespected by Democrats. I think that's very sad. I think political leaders of both parties need to respect religious people and their values and the tradition in this country. I believe in the separation of church and state, absolutely. But I don't believe in the separation of public life from our values, our basic values, and for many of us, our religious values. One of them for me is this deep concern about overcoming poverty. That is a religious value for me, not just a political one.⁴⁴

Presidential candidate Barack Obama agrees, arguing "it's wrong to ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square. . . .To say men and women should not inject their 'personal morality' into policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality."⁴⁵ The website FaithfulDemocrats.com says that all voices (including those of unbelievers) must be heard in the public realm, but makes this assertion: "FaithfulDemocrats.com itself seeks to serve as a prophetic Christian voice in the political arena. We are proud of our faith and insist on using that power to make a difference in the country we love."⁴⁶ Not only is it appropriate for politicians openly to allow faith to inform their political views, says this online Christian group, but in fact, "Scripture requires that we let the light of our faith shine for all to see."⁴⁷ Professing one's Christian faith as a foundation of one's political principles is therefore not only a legitimate exercise in freedom of religion, it is also a

⁴⁴ Jim Wallis, "Frontline: The Jesus Factor: Interview with Jim Wallis," www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/interviews/wallis.html (accessed June 21, 2007).

⁴⁵ Barack Obama, "Politicians Need Not Abandon Religion," *USA Today*, July 10, 2006, 11a.

⁴⁶ FaithfulDemocrats.com, "Issue Analysis," www.faithfuldemocrats.com/content (accessed June 27, 2007).

necessary aspect of one's devotion to Jesus. And finally, as Gary Rosen writes, many on the religious left argue that a "categorical rejection of faith in the public square is impossible to reconcile with our political traditions. It sweeps away not just today's social conservatives but also abolitionism, women's suffrage and the civil rights movement."⁴⁸

Indeed, this last point is central to the arguments of many on the religious left. As I discuss in greater detail below, they see political positions based on notions of social and economic justice as completely consistent with, and even based in, the teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, they point to the history of progressive movements in America and note the prominent role that faith groups played as activists and leaders within these movements. Whether considering the antebellum abolitionist movement, the suffrage movement, or the southern civil rights movement, it is impossible not to discuss the fact that personal faith and religious institutions were both animating features of the political activities.

Will the rejection of secularism in its different manifestations improve the electoral successes of the Democratic party? Like the tactic of personal testimony, any prognostications of its efficacy must be mixed. Given the religiosity of the American public and generalized support for both professions of faith and the involvement of religious institutions in the delivery of social services, the movement away from secularism may indeed encourage some voters to look more favorably on the Democratic party. In the view of some commentators, the party has seemed so uncomfortable with religion for so long that many voters who support the Democratic economic/social policies have seen the Republican party as the only one offering a vision of American society that includes 'morality.' Steve Waldman, the editor of the nonpartisan webzine *Beliefnet*, said, "There has been a sense that Democrats have been so beyond the pale on [values] issues that there was this obstacle to get many people to even consider voting for Democrats."⁴⁹ Rabbi Lerner penned a chapter on "The Religion of Secularism and the Fear of the Spirit" in which he argued, "The Left's hostility to religion is one of the main

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Gary Rosen, "Narrowing the Religion Gap?" *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2007, 11.

⁴⁹ Quoted by Patrick Hynes, "Keeping the Faith: Evangelicals Remain Wary of the Democrats' Overtures," *The American Spectator*, Feb. 2007, 48-49.

reasons people who might otherwise be involved in progressive politics get turned off.”⁵⁰ Moreover, research indicates that the American public in general feels more hostility toward atheists than any faith group, demonstrating how widespread assumptions of religiosity are in the U.S.⁵¹ Finally, as mentioned previously and discussed more fully below, there is some evidence from the exit polling from the 2006 election that the 'antiseccularism' movement could be successful.

In addition, a more welcoming attitude toward faith might help in mobilizing the African-American community. Black churches have long been important, if not central, to black political activism, and many in the African-American electorate see faith claims as inextricably bound up with claims for social and economic justice. However, the conservatism of many African-American clergy and voters on the cultural issues of abortion and gay rights has sometimes benefited the Republican party,⁵² and made for an uncomfortable alliance with other groups within the Democratic coalition (i.e., feminists and gay rights advocates). Democratic candidates who thus engage in 'God talk' could perhaps be more likely to galvanize the African-American electorate and improve the voting rate (note the success of Bill Clinton in this regard). Also, the black community tends to favor school voucher programs as well as faith-based initiatives, so a softening stance by the Democratic party on these policies might make the party appear more sympathetic to the plight of poor urban minorities.⁵³

But there is also a risk that the party will alienate a different part of its base by engaging in a great deal of 'God talk.' People who never attend church or do so infrequently are overwhelmingly likely to vote Democratic: “[in 2006, the] least observant voters (who never attend worship) voted 69 percent Democratic and 31 percent Republican.”⁵⁴ Many of the most reliable Democratic voters—highly educated 'policy wonks' and opinion makers—express concern with the 'come to Jesus' strategy within the party. Wallis and Lerner are not wrong that there are strong secularists within the

⁵⁰ Lerner, *Left Hand of God*, 128.

⁵¹ Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership In American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211-234.

⁵² Jeff Diamant, "Same-Sex Ban May Tip Black Votes; Many Churchgoers Back Bush on Ban," *The Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], Aug. 4, 2004, 14.

⁵³ Diana Jean Schemo, "Federal Program on Vouchers Draws Strong Minority Support," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2006, A1.

⁵⁴ John C. Green, "Faithful Voters," *Christian Century*, Dec. 12, 2006, 9-10.

liberal/left, and these voters are often actively suspicious of those who want to cite scripture as a basis for political position-taking. In a recent column in which Katha Pollitt discussed Jim Wallis's *God's Politics*, she admitted she approached the book thinking about "the Crusades and the Salem witch trials. . .[and] the Magdalene laundries and the anti-evolution policies of the Dover, Pennsylvania, school board."⁵⁵ George Lakeoff, the progressive academic who has been pushing the Democrats to reclaim the debate on morality, cautions that morality does not come from religion, but rather from reason and empathy.⁵⁶ A website for the Democratic Party hosts a group called "Government Free From Religion," which states its principles:

An inclusive government that represents ALL the people must be free from religious bias and influence. Whether you are a person of faith, an atheist, or an agnostic, this group is for rational freethinkers who wish to explore issues and share resources related to governmental freedom from religion.⁵⁷

In response to an article about the issue of gay marriage currently confronting state legislators, a letter to the editor in *The New York Times* writes the following:

Do we need to remind these legislators that they took an oath of office to uphold the Constitution, not the tenets of their religion? If they vote according to their religious beliefs rather than their understanding of the Constitution, they have legitimately opened the door to being questioned about those beliefs, something that Americans have been loath to do but that becomes necessary if their religious principles take precedence over the Constitution.⁵⁸

This letter encapsulates the deep concern that many of the liberal/left feel when politicians cite their faith as the source of policy making.

The question always becomes, of course, when talking about 'alienating one's base,' what the base will do if it is alienated. It is difficult to imagine many of the Democratic secularists voting for Republicans because of the Democrats' turn toward religion. For the foreseeable future, the Republican party will continue to be the choice of the conservative Christian right and will be more likely than the Democratic party to

⁵⁵ Katha Pollitt, "Jesus to the Rescue?" *The Nation*, Feb. 7, 2007, 10.

⁵⁶ George Lakeoff, *Whose Freedom: The Battle over America's Most Important Idea* (New York: Picador, 2006), 200.

⁵⁷ The Democratic Party, "Government Free From Religion," www.democrats.org/page/community/group/GovernmentFreeFromReligion (accessed June 27, 2007).

adopt positions imbued with those values. However, these Democrats can stay home from the polls, close their pocketbooks, refuse to participate in mobilization efforts, and dispiritedly blog about the terrible state of the party.⁵⁹ They can vote for Nader (or Bloomberg?). They can vigorously participate in primaries in support of the most secular candidate and thus defeat more centrist candidates or leave them fatally bloodied. They can raise their voices in such protest against religion and in such support of atheists Dawkins, Hitchens, and Sam Harris⁶⁰ that the ‘swing’ evangelicals and Catholics rush back to the Republicans. Or, if the Democrats are lucky, they can write off the God talk as a necessary strategic evil and play along with the party, repeating to themselves, “anybody but Bush.” Probably some secularists will do each of the above; the point here is the party cannot necessarily take this faction for granted or presume that a pro-faith Democratic candidate is an unmixed blessing.

C. Rejection of the Religious Right

D. Reframing the Debate

I will consider these final two themes of the new strategy together. They are of course analytically distinct, as one can criticize the actions and ideologies of the religious right—something done with great frequency by liberal secularists—without seeking to claim the moral and religious high ground. But within the religious left, these two themes are inextricably intertwined. Unlike secularists who want all religious-based arguments removed from political discourse, the religious left wants to substitute its understanding of morality and God’s will for the interpretation propounded by the religious right. As one can easily gather from the titles of the books mentioned above, the political mobilization of the Christian right (often termed a “countermovement” to the social movements of the 60s and 70s) has been the impetus for the new mobilization of the religious left. Simply put, religious progressives are angry that the name of Jesus has

⁵⁸ Andrew Weiss, letter to the editor, *The New York Times*, June 28, 2007, A22.

⁵⁹ I might note here that prominent among those who contribute substantial sums to Democratic candidates include secular Jews who understandably perceive christocentric language as a language of exclusion and discrimination. Democratic candidates dependent on this campaign money must be careful not to offend this constituency.

⁶⁰ Works of these popular atheist writers include Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Knopf: 2006).

been invoked to support a particular social agenda and to accuse those who oppose the conservative agenda as antifaith, antichristian, and antifamily. They see the conservative agenda as a perversion of the true message of God's love, and wish to promote publicly their own understanding of morality.

There is remarkable similarity in the arguments made by the various spokespersons of the religious left and many of them have been covered by the media, so I will summarize briefly.⁶¹ The progressives point out that the religious right focuses on a handful of issues, largely those dealing with sex and family matters, and defines a particular position on them as the 'Christian' and 'moral' position which will promote 'family values.' Most prominent among these issues are abortion and same-sex marriage, but stem cell research, the teaching of evolution, abstinence-only education, and same-sex adoption are also included. Most of these issues deal with personal behavior, sex, family, and what we often think of as the 'private sphere' of life.⁶² Glaringly absent from this list, say religious liberals, is any mention of the Christian duty to one's fellow human beings. Jesus didn't discuss abortion or birth control, but often spoke of caring for those in poverty. The gospels are filled with exhortations about how to treat "the least of you"; they say little, if anything, about sexual behavior (other than urging people to be kind and forgiving to Mary Magdalene).

Those supporting the new strategy argue that morality is a much broader term than is assumed by the religious right. In their view, morality, specifically Christian morality, includes treating all humans as equal in the eyes of God (so one should support civil rights for all groups, including women, gays, and immigrants). Morality includes caring for the least fortunate (through increased social services) and ensuring greater economic justice (through a higher minimum wage). Christian morality takes seriously "blessed are the peacemakers," demanding that one turn away from violence and war

⁶¹ I will be painting with broad brushstrokes here; as mentioned above, some members of the "religious left" are pro-life and anti-same-sex marriage.

⁶² I should note here that there is a move among younger evangelical leaders to broaden the areas of political action. Several prominent leaders have begun to address the problems of environmental degradation, AIDS, human trafficking, and poverty. This has caused consternation within some conservative evangelical organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals. See Michael Gerson, "A New Social Gospel: Many Evangelicals are Chafing at the Narrowness of the Religious Right," *Newsweek*, Nov. 13, 2006, pp. 40ff; Michael Luo and Laurie Goodstein, "Emphasis Shifts For New Breed of Evangelicals," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2007, A1; Laurie Goodstein, "Evangelical Group Rebuffs Critics on Right," *The New York Times*, Mar. 14, 2007, A15.

except when absolutely necessary (making the Iraq war unjust). Devotion to God includes a devotion to the world He created (mandating legislation protecting the environment and retraining business development). Morality even includes allowing women to make the best possible choices they can when considering whether to give birth (meaning that abortion rights and ready access to contraception are necessary). Finally, Christian morality does not include intolerance (or hatred) toward those who have different beliefs.

In short, the pro-religion Democrats and others of the religious left are making two interrelated arguments. One is that the Christian religion, properly understood by focusing on the words and actions of Jesus, places an affirmative duty on believers to care for their brethren in ways that demand an activist government that assumes responsibility for providing for basic human needs (claims for social and economic welfare) and recognizes a need for humans to receive equal treatment under the law (claims of civil rights) while also allowing for zones of individual free will (claims of liberties). Obviously, these affirmative Christian duties correspond nicely with the Democratic platform of the past few decades. Secondly, they are seeking to expand the connotations of the term “morality” to go beyond personal behavior and include social justice. They do not like ‘morals issues’ or ‘values issues’ to be shorthand for abortion and gay marriage—isn’t peace a value?, they ask. Isn’t it moral to feed the poor? They want to reframe the debate so that the formula is no longer *religion and morals v. secularism and big government*. Instead, the debate will presume religious and moral concerns on both sides of the equation.

Religious progressives point to American history to bolster this understanding of faith-based activity. The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries was the attempt by liberal Protestant evangelicals to ‘rally Christian forces’ to confront the social problems caused by urbanization and industrialization.⁶³ Associated with pastors Washington Gladden, George D. Herron, and Walter Rauschenbusch, adherents to the social gospel argued that personal morality was insufficient to achieve the Kingdom of God on earth. Rather, Christians had an affirmative duty to act in the public sphere to make the world a better place for all humankind. Advocates of the social

⁶³ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford U Press, 1984) 135.

gospel particularly focused on the welfare of laborers, especially the right of labor to organize. Today's religious progressives argue this move away from focusing solely on personal salvation and emphasizing instead the need to right social wrongs was a transformative part of the Protestant religious tradition and it must be repeated in the twenty-first century.

The abolitionist movement of the early nineteenth century was also led by liberal Protestant clergy in the northeastern U.S. In fact, the Second Great Awakening and the spread of evangelical passion provided much of the impetus for the spread of abolitionism in the 1830s. 'Radical' ministers traveled and preached on the evils of slavery, and the arguments against slavery were couched in explicitly religious language, claiming that slavery was a sinful stain on the body politic.⁶⁴ This movement then helped spawn the first wave of the women's rights movement in the 1840s and 50s, for its members were abolitionist women and were also apt to couch their demands for equality in religious terms.⁶⁵ The Seneca Falls Resolution, for example, calls on the "Creator" (echoing the Declaration of Independence) and claims that Man "has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her [Woman] a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God."⁶⁶ A century later, the southern civil rights movement was organized and led by African-American Protestant clergy. Black churches were the ground-zero of civil rights activity, and again, the clergy often spoke of the struggle in religious terminology. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and his speech "I See the Promised Land" were both laced with references to Moses, Paul, and the notion of blacks as "God's children."

One can argue, of course, that the principles and rhetoric of these various progressive movements owed as much—if not more—to the Enlightenment philosophy of classical liberalism, with feet planted firmly in rationalism and a respect for human rights that was not derived exclusively from divine will. But the point here is that, for

⁶⁴ This does not mean that the institutional church jumped on the abolitionist bandwagon. In fact, official organizations of the various Protestant denominations denounced the work of the early abolitionists.

⁶⁵ I do not ignore the fact that many of these early feminists also decried the ways in which the Judeo-Christian tradition had degraded and oppressed women. See, e.g., *The Women's Bible* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

⁶⁶ "Declaration of Sentiments" and "Resolutions" adopted by the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, reprinted in *Women's Rights, Feminism, and Politics in the United States*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley (Washington, DC: American Political Science Assoc., 1987): 4.

over a century, the Enlightenment claims rested comfortably next to the religious claims, and religious liberals saw no contradiction. And that is precisely the point being made by those on the Democratic/religious left today: One need not sacrifice the political values of the Enlightenment nor the traditional agenda of the Democratic party when bringing discussions of faith to the table. The history of America and of progressive movements provides the cultural, rhetorical, and philosophical basis for overlapping secular and faith-based political claims.

IV. Will the Reframing Succeed?

I have little doubt that Democrats are capable of maintaining their majority in Congress and perhaps even gaining the presidency in 2008 (though one should never underestimate the party's ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory). My focus here is on whether the specific strategy of openly embracing faith claims and religious testimony will be successful in winning elections. It is impossible to assess, of course, exactly what leads a party or candidate to victory in any particular election. Nonetheless, I will speculate on some of the possible problems with this strategy.

I have already named a couple of possible negatives: the unpredictability of projecting personal authenticity and the alienation of secular voters. Here are four others that occur to me:

A. Skepticism by religious (as well as nonreligious) voters. As mentioned above, personal faith testimony can seem manipulative and cynical if it does not appear completely sincere. Going beyond that specific aspect of the new strategy, the entire move by Democrats to talk about faith and values may well be just that: a strategy. As one might expect, some conservative commentators already have been dismissive, chastising the Democrats for thinking they "can fool the people into believing . . . [they're] values-oriented, too."⁶⁷ But the suspicion that the Democrats are less than sincere could well influence those who don't have an obvious motivation for discounting the party.⁶⁸ When Democratic candidates start knocking on the doors of churches that they long ago ceded to the Republicans, one can easily expect the public at large to look

⁶⁷ David Limbaugh, "Whom Do Democrats Think They're Fooling," *Human Events*, Feb. 14, 2005, 5.

⁶⁸ Gilgoff, "The Politics of Faith," 26-7; Hynes, "Keeping the Faith," 48-9.

askance at them. Those who are and those who are not swayed by religious appeals could both conclude that the party is pandering.⁶⁹

B. Whose votes are available? Though some look at the glass as half full, the results of the 2006 elections do not necessarily give cause for great celebration. In comparing the 2006 to the midterm election in 2002, John C. Green⁷⁰ of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life points out that most of the votes gained by the Democrats were from their traditional coalition. The largest gain was made among Jewish voters, up 21% from 2002. Democrats received 13% more votes from those of nonchristian faiths. Those with no religious affiliation increased their votes for Democrats by 12%. If one compares the Catholic vote in 2006 to 2004, there appeared to be a significant swing toward Democrats—6%--but when 2006 is compared to 2002, the Democrats only increased their share by 2%. Can one truly argue that talking about faith—especially Christian faith—brought most of these votes to the Democrats?

White mainline Protestants might be the group most expected to respond to the new strategy, for the language and issue-framing of the religious left would be most familiar to this group. But Democratic gains here were also small in 2006: 2 to 3%. Of course, the white evangelical vote is the one that everyone has been watching. The results were not encouraging for Democrats: “White evangelical Protestants gave Republican congressional candidates 73 percent of the two-party vote in 2006, down only three percentage points from 2004 and two points from 2002.”⁷¹ Certainly, a couple of percentage points can make all the difference in a close election, so if the God-talk does not offend the seculars or other religious minorities, it may be well be worth it for the Democrats to follow this path. But the numbers do not yet demonstrate this to be a reliable tactic. The swing to the Democrats in 2006 certainly cannot be viewed in isolation from the context of the unpopularity of the Iraq war and the corruption scandals surrounding the Republicans.

C. The secularization of liberal faith-groups. This factor focuses our attention on the doctrinal content of liberal religious belief, apart from activities in the political

⁶⁹ Numerous blogs, both liberal and conservative, accused Howard Dean of pandering when he appeared on Pat Robertson’s “700 Club.”

⁷⁰ John C. Green, “Faithful Voters,” *Christian Century*, Dec. 12, 2006, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

realm. By embracing modernity, science, and tolerance of all faiths (and of no faiths), the religious left may well find itself without the means to mobilize votes based on religious belief.

As noted by sociologist Phillip Hammond and others, religion in the twentieth century became *privatized*, in that it became a matter completely within the private sphere of life, beyond the reach of the government or community.⁷² “But,” writes Hammond, “what is one’s right to keep private thus becomes unavailable as justification in making a social claim.”⁷³ Particularly among mainline Protestant churches, which since the 1960s have emphasized social action, the social gospel, and tolerance of religious pluralism,⁷⁴ there is far less room to animate political action based on the belief of an absolute religious truth than there is within conservative evangelical circles. Reading the rhetoric of the religious left demonstrates the difficulty it has in making absolute doctrinal claims. While the books and websites discussed above talk about Christian faith and the acts of Jesus, they also are quick to express their respect for believers and unbelievers of all stripes.⁷⁵ Religious belief thus becomes reduced to individual subjective conscience, leaving one’s claim that the minimum wage should be raised without a faith-based leg on which to stand.

Journalists covering the political activities of the religious left have noted this problem. When the Network of Spiritual Progressives gathered in Washington, DC in 2006, they struggled to develop a specific political agenda. When a liberal Baptist minister argued that Democrats should rely on the Bible to sway religious public officials, a young man said:

I thought this was a spiritual progressives conference. I don’t want to play the game of ‘the Bible says this or that’ or that we get validation from something other than ourselves. We should be speaking from our hearts.⁷⁶

⁷² Phillip E. Hammond, *The Protestant Presence In Twentieth-Century America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 19.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics*, 269.

⁷⁵ For an excellent discussion of the language of individualism versus the language of community within U.S. political culture, see Rhys H. Williams, “Visions of the Good Society and the Religious Roots of American Political Culture,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 1-34.

⁷⁶ Quoted by Neela Banerjee, “Religious Left Struggles to Find Unifying Message,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2006, 17.

In the end, said the reporter, “the biggest barrier for liberals may be their regard for pluralism. . . .”⁷⁷ When John Podesta’s “Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative” held a discussion in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the journalist covering it noted that the “most striking aspect of the evening was how little discussion there was of faith. . . . [they] avoided discussing their religious and political identities. They stressed instead the need to find common ground among Christians who share a faith. . . and among people of various faith traditions (or no faith tradition).”⁷⁸ The commentator pointed out this problem:

a weakness of the center-left [is] its tendency to neglect or assume a social vision, and its difficulty in communicating that vision in a way that attracts people motivated by their faith commitments. . . . [M]any Christians, especially conservative ones, do not trust appeals to Christian morality that come from people who don’t also speak of their love of God.⁷⁹

The very aspects of modern mainline Protestantism that make it appealing to many of its followers—that all are welcomed, none are judged, no one is subjected to strict doctrinal tests—make it unavailable for clear, unambiguous faith-based arguments and temperamentally unwilling to engage in political discipline. It thus becomes unclear how liberal religious groups can organize and mobilize themselves in ways that are distinct from any other secular liberal interest group.⁸⁰

D. Can “morality” mean something other than sex? As discussed above, Democrats and religious progressives want to wrest the term *morality* from the religious right, and apply the notion to economic justice and peace. A matter for some speculation is whether the word itself can re-purposed in such a manner.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ William Katerberg, “Can Democrats Get Religion?” *Christian Century*, Dec. 27, 2005, 9-10.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ I should note here that studies of grassroots organizing among religious liberals have found that public policies are often discussed in the language of faith and morality. However, this activism is very community-based, localized, and often specific to particular congregations. The “faith talk” doesn’t leap to the larger arena of coalition-building, where one’s claims must take on a broader appeal among liberals of many stripes. See Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement Among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001); and Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002).

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In her history of the family, *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz discusses the restrictive use of the term *moral* that developed after the Civil War.⁸¹ From the early modern period through the mid-nineteenth century, she argues, a moral man was one who embodied civic virtue. Morality was something that occurred in the public realm in relation to others, “public engagement was considered the primary badge of personal character; *honor* and *virtue* were political words, not sexual ones.”⁸² In the Gilded Age, however, unbridled capitalism, rapid industrialization, and unrestrained individualism caused notions of morality to shrink into the private realm. Middleclass morality became located within the strict confines of the family, referring primarily to one’s sexual behavior and abstention from vices—gambling and drinking—that defined the line between rectitude and debauchery. ‘Morals legislation’ referred to laws dealing with this narrow field of private behavior; arresting someone on a ‘morals charge’ inevitably had to do with sex. Meanwhile, argues Coontz, one’s actions in the public sphere of the market were not a matter of morality. Thus a robber baron, so long as he was faithful to his wife, was a moral man. “[P]rivate morality and family life represented a higher and purer duty than did political or social activism. . . .”⁸³

It is not clear to me that, in over a century, the term *morality* has expanded much beyond this straightjacket of sex and family issues. The religious right has defined morality as those policies—abortion, contraception, unwed motherhood, same-sex marriage—dealing with just such private matters. Yes, the left has continually used the term ‘immoral’ to refer to various military actions and economic policies, but does this use *really* have traction in common parlance? If there were a reference to the ‘immorality of Republicans’ in this last campaign, would most people—even liberals—have thought of tax breaks for the wealthy (or even of Jack Abramoff), or would they have focused on Representative Mark Foley and the congressional page scandal? While few people will

⁸¹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

disagree with the notion that a ‘moral person’ is one who cares for one’s fellow human beings, a campaign sound byte using the term *moral values* is unlikely to bring a higher minimum wage to mind.

I therefore think the attempt of Democrats and religious progressives to reclaim the language of morality from its long-restricted use is an uphill battle at best. Making claims for more social welfare programs and economic opportunities might better be couched in the language of ‘justice’ and ‘fairness,’ which have long been used by American progressives.

Conclusions

The recent move by Democrats and religious progressives to inject religion and faith claims into the language of the liberal left is an interesting attempt to undercut the assertion of Republicans that they are the sole party where believers are respected and moral values count. The midterm campaigns of 2006 saw a number of Democrats speaking openly of religion, which coincided with good fortunes for their party. A number of organizations, initiatives, websites, forums, and books have appeared, all seeking to de-secularize the Democratic party and reframe the political debate in religious, but also progressive, terms.

Whether this will be successful, and what it may mean for the future of both the party and political discourse is not clear. In regards to the immediate electoral fortunes of the Democratic party, the turn toward God-talk could well be a mixed bag. The Democratic coalition has many factions, and its heterogeneity makes it difficult to present a unified vision on matters outside of economic/social welfare policy. On the positive side, many African-Americans, white liberal Protestants, and populist evangelicals might

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welcome the party's recognition that religious faith animates their political views. Those who would never vote Republican, but may not always vote at all, might thus be persuaded to come to the polls in greater numbers and actively work for Democratic candidates. Those who agree with Democrats' economic agenda, but sometimes vote Republican because of their discomfort with secularism, might swing their votes toward a Democratic candidate who testifies about his religious beliefs. But an active part of the Democratic base may well be repelled by an embrace of religiosity, for it violates their deeply held conviction that faith-based claims have no place in the public sphere. For them, Democratic candidates engaging in religious testimony represents a victory for the religious right and a betrayal of the classical liberal principles they hold dear. Though these secularists may not vote Republican, their potential abstention from active organizing and fundraising could prove devastating to the party. Finally, by adopting the language of religion and morality, Democrats risk sounding like Republican-lite, cynically touting their faith after looking at the latest polls. As a purely electoral strategy, the party might do better to become more unified on matters involving global trade, labor rights, education, and healthcare than to be perceived as stealing a page from the Republican playbook.

But there is a larger debate at issue here, which is over the appropriate role for religious-based discourse in a political culture that seeks to separate the public arena from the private. How and when religion straddles the boundaries between the two spheres is a terrain continually contested in American social life and politics. Expecting people of deep faith to refrain from expressing the religious roots of their political beliefs deprives them of the language that animates their engagement in the public realm; however,

suffusing political discourse with religiously-based claims might often reduce public policy debates to exercises in biblical interpretation. The difficulties experienced by the Democratic party over the use of God talk is thus merely one example of the continuing problematic relationship between religion and politics in American culture.

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