Voters and values: The divided mind of the religious left

by David Heim in the August 8, 2006 issue

The rise of the religious left has been rumored or trumpeted for almost two decades. A series of organizations—Call to Renewal, the Interfaith Alliance, Faith in Public Life, Faith Voices for the Common Good, the Network of Spiritual Progressives, to name a few—has been created over the years with the aim of mobilizing religious liberals and showing that not all Christians think like James Dobson. Every few years, a group of religious liberals vows to counter the religious right by making the case that God is much more concerned about helping the poor, the hungry and the sick than about criminalizing abortion or opposing homosexuality.

Another sighting of the religious left has been made in recent months. “Lo and behold there is a religious left,” declared an article in *Slate* (April 5). “The religious left is back,” announced the *Washington Post* (May 20). *National Review Online* (June 2) referred to “the fast-emerging religious left.” The evidence? An increase in blogging and organizing, as well as several best-selling books: Jim Wallis’s *God’s Politics*, Michael Lerner’s *The Left Hand of God* and Jimmy Carter’s *Our Endangered Values*.

The rise of the religious left provides a natural journalistic lead because it plays against type. The persistent assumption, at least among mainstream media, is that Christians are politically active only on the conservative side.

This assumption is misguided, of course. The religious left has a long tradition behind it—indeed, a deeper and longer tradition than the religious right has. The religious left (it is “left” only insofar as it is to the left of the right) flourishes in black churches, the social witness arms and Washington offices of mainline churches, and agencies like the Catholic bishops’ Campaign for Human Development, the National Council of Churches, Bread for the World, Interfaith Worker Justice and the Children’s Defense Fund.

But myopia regarding the religious left is understandable. The religious left has not displayed the political muscle that the right has, nor can it boast heavyweight political activists (with vast mailing lists and fund-raising machines) like Dobson, Pat Robertson or Tony Perkins. Moreover, whereas the Republicans have made a strategic alliance with the religious right, using opposition to abortion and gay marriage to attract conservative religious voters, the Democrats have tended to be resolutely secular. Appalled by the religious right, most have been indifferent to or unaware of the religious left. (In the Democrats' defense, the religious left has yet to show that it responds to wedge issues in a way that wins elections.)

Is that about to change? Is the religious left finally muscling up? Will the Democrats, having studied the exit polls on "moral values," finally get religion?

Perhaps. But the religious left faces some inherent limitations. To begin with, mainline Protestants and Catholics just don't see as tight a connection between faith and politics as evangelical Protestants do. A 2004 survey conducted by pollsters at the University of Akron asked people how important religion is in their political thinking. Fifty-eight percent of evangelicals said it was important, whereas only 32 percent of mainline Protestants and 26 percent of Catholics said it was important.

The contrast sharpens further if one considers the subgroups that the Akron poll labeled "traditionalist evangelical" and "modernist mainline": 81 percent of the former group said that religion is important to their political thinking, but only 15 percent of the latter group did. It appears that the more conservative one is religiously, the more one's religious beliefs inform one's political views; conversely, the more liberal one is religiously, the more one regards politics as a distinct sphere of activity. (This contrast is all the more remarkable given that a generation ago it was traditionalist evangelicals who wanted to keep religion out of politics.)

Given this hesitation, the religious left enters the political field with contradictory impulses. To some extent, the left wants to oppose the religious right with its own set of vigorous religious claims. When the right thunders, "God condemns gay marriage," the left itches to retort, "God condemns a system that lowers taxes on the wealthy, cuts aid for the poor and ignores the 45 million people who lack health insurance." The left thinks that Christian values lead to a different set of public priorities. In its eyes, inadequate health care, unequal access to education, the growing disparity between rich and poor, and the despoiling of the environment are more pressing political issues—and more the kind the Bible explicitly

addresses—than abortion and gay marriage. In other words, the religious left wants, at least at times, to offer a set of Christian values that parallels the right's but differs in content.

But another element within the religious left is deeply uneasy about bringing religion directly into the political sphere. It doubts that a knock-down political fight about what God wants is good for religion or politics. The fact that the religious right is so eager for that fight is just what the religious left finds scary.

The divided impulses of the religious left are evident in Jan G. Linn's *Big Christianity*: *What's Right with the Religious Left* (Westminster John Knox), one of several more books out this summer that are trying to combat the religious right. Linn, a Disciples of Christ minister, chastises the religious right in expected ways: it is narrow, moralistic, intolerant, power hungry, absolutist, blindly patriotic and anti-intellectual. Like many people who have made a journey out of fundamentalism, Linn appreciates the "bigger" tradition of Christianity that he finds in the mainline churches, which value intellectual curiosity, are willing to live with moral ambiguities and theological uncertainties and are open to the possibility that non-Christians have some piece of the truth.

In parts of the book, Linn combats the right with a countervision of Christian political witness. For example, he argues that the religious right has a "blind trust in the power of trickle-down economics," whereas "Bigger Christianity" tries to "direct the power of private and public resources to social problems." Whereas the religious right thinks most economic problems can be traced to individual laziness, Bigger Christianity sees the entire culture as corrupted by consumerism and the mad pursuit of material satisfaction. Linn paints these political differences in very broad strokes; it's hard to imagine anyone who doesn't already share his views being persuaded. But it's clear that he thinks the religious left offers a substantively different political vision.

Elsewhere, however, Linn focuses his complaint not on the religious right's message but on its absolutist style. One of the heroes of Linn's book, quoted at length, is John Danforth, the Episcopal priest and former U.S. senator who has critiqued the ideological rigidities of the religious right and the way the right has polarized political discourse. Danforth extols, by contrast, the virtues of "moderate Christians," who are "less sure about where and how our beliefs can be translated into statutory form, not because of a lack of belief in God but because of a healthy

acknowledgment of our limitations as human beings."

Danforth says that for moderate Christians, "the only absolute standard of behavior is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves," and the effort to follow this commandment does not directly lead to a particular political stance. Adhering to the pattern of mainline thinking evident in the Akron poll, Danforth sees only a tentative relationship between one's faith and one's political stance. The primary virtue that Christians bring to politics, in his view, is not a passionate commitment to particular issues but humility. If Danforth is one of its heroes, then the religious left is not all that adamantly of the left.

In resisting a close identification of religion and politics, Danforth (and, at times, Linn) reflects a profound tradition of Christian thought, a tradition that regards politics as the realm of prudential judgment, not theological confession. Politics should be informed by religious belief but should not be identified with it. As Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great expositors of this tradition, would put it, political judgments are morally ambiguous efforts to approximate justice in the contingent realm of history in which God's purposes remain ultimately inscrutable.

Conflicting impulses are a sign of the complexity of the religious left. They can also come across as a sign of confusion. One can understand why people on the right regard the twin messages as a case of hypocrisy: "You want to keep religion out of politics except when it's your kind of religion or your kind of politics."

This ambivalence at least suggests why the religious left is not likely to play the role that the secular press imagines for it: a direct counterpoint to the religious right. It also helps explain why every few years the religious left seems to have to retool its message.

A persistent hope of the religious left and of some leaders in the Democratic Party is that liberal politicians will at least learn to speak authentically and persuasively about their own faith. This hope is tied in part to a strategy: the Democrats know that if they want to win at the national level, they need to reach out to religiously motivated voters. It's no accident that the only two presidents the Democrats have elected in the past 30 years, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, were southerners who were at home with the language of evangelical Christianity. But the hope also springs from the broader desire to reconfigure public discourse to show that *Christian* does not have the narrow meaning that the right ascribes to it.

One of the main repositories of such hopes is Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois who came to national attention with a speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention. That speech, which included the line, “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States,” showed not only deft political skills but an awareness of grassroots Christianity that is light years ahead of that of most leading figures in the party. In late June, speaking at a meeting of Call to Renewal, Obama delivered a widely noticed address on faith and politics. Jim Wallis called it a landmark speech for the religious left, and E. J. Dionne, the savvy commentator for the *Washington Post*, termed it a “road map” for Democrats.

Yet the speech was not so much the embodiment of a new rhetoric of faith and politics for the religious left as one more prospectus for it. Obama acknowledged the central role of religion in American life, and he stressed that liberals should not ask believers to “leave their religion at the door before entering the public square.” Since “values and culture” are central to people’s lives, progressives will have to get over their uneasiness about referring to values. If they don’t, “the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons will continue to hold sway.”

That makes good sense. But that observation has been made a number of times in recent years, with no marked change either in the ethos of the Democratic Party or in the visibility of the religious left. Stephen Carter made essentially the same argument a decade ago in *The Culture of Disbelief*, and his book was a reworking of themes developed in Richard John Neuhaus’s *Naked Public Square* a decade before that.

Moreover, even as Obama urged Democrats to get over their skittishness about religious values, he called for a toning-down of religious rhetoric. “People are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack. They don’t want faith used to belittle or to divide. They’re tired of hearing folks deliver more screed than sermon.”

So again the divided mind of the religious left is in evidence. Obama captures the fine line the religious left wants to walk: it wants to invoke religious values, but not the divisive kind. Can it be done? Any appeal to religion that is more than a platitude (“God bless the United States”) is likely to offend somebody.

Liberal appeals to deep religious values are surely possible, but more examples of liberals actually doing this would be more valuable than one more call for it to be done.

Tim Kaine of Virginia has shown one way to do it. In his successful campaign for governor last year, Kaine spoke of how his opposition to the death penalty grew out of his faith as a Catholic. Kaine was able to fend off conservative attacks, including an ad that accused him of being willing to pardon Hitler. Kaine didn't run away from his faith; he found a way to draw on it that showed he is a man of conviction, and that made it hard for his opponents to ridicule him.

From the evidence of Obama's speech, his own preferred mode of moral appeal is triangulation—fusing so-called conservative values of individual responsibility with progressive social policies. For example, he endorsed government regulations to keep guns out of the hands of the inner-city thug but acknowledged that something more than government regulations is needed to heal the "hole in that young man's heart." He endorsed sex education to prevent unwanted pregnancies but affirmed that parental guidance is needed to teach adolescents sexual responsibility.

This kind of "third way" politics, moving left and right at the same time, has been a feature of the religious left as theorized by authors like Wallis and Lerner. Obama has clearly mastered the rhetoric of the third way, and his great promise is that he might actually make such rhetoric effective at the national level, convincing voters that progressive government programs are consistent with traditional religious values.

But the actual practice of fusing conservative values and liberal policy in the heat of a campaign can be a messy affair. Clinton, the master triangulator, famously went out of his way in 1998 to criticize the violent lyrics of a black hip-hop artist in order to establish himself as someone who cared about values. Obama has not yet had to face such crude or controversial political choices.

A more substantive version of moral triangulation by the left is being practiced in this year's Senate race in the swing state of Pennsylvania, where Democrat Bob Casey Jr. is challenging the incumbent, hard-core conservative Rick Santorum. Casey is a traditional liberal on most issues, such as immigration, health care, Social Security and the minimum wage, but he is virtually indistinguishable from Santorum on abortion and embryonic stem cell research, which both oppose. To some extent Casey's stance has neutralized Santorum on these issues.

Many Democrats had to swallow hard to nominate the pro-life Casey, knowing that it would alienate one of the party's core constituencies. In this case, the desire for

victory made the Democrats adopt a big-tent policy on moral values. A Casey victory might have interesting consequences for the future of the religious left.

Electoral success is not the only measure of politics. Losing efforts can succeed in raising issues and educating voters. The religious left, though it lacks the absolutist fervor of the religious right, can play a significant role in reframing political discussions. But in the end, it will be the fortunes of politicians like Obama, Kaine and Casey, and of their varied efforts to appeal to religious and moral values, that will shape the religious left. Without results on that front, the next round of reports touting the rise of the religious left will not have anything interesting to say.