A new partnership

by James M. Wall in the June 16, 1999 issue

Vice-President Al Gore chose a safe venue—a Salvation Army gathering in Atlanta—to start talking about religion. But he knew he had to go beyond such comfortable surroundings if he was to make a serious case that "without values of conscience, our political life degenerates."

Gore's Atlanta speech, which called for a new partnership between government and faith-based institutions, was soon followed by a meeting with journalists who cover religion. As he entered the Ward Room at the White House, 30 minutes late and apologetic, Gore was prepared to talk about faith and government with columnists and beat reporters from such secular media as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and ABC television.

Gore proceeded to cite the well-known theologian Reinhold Niebuhr along with the lesser-known philosophers Edmund Husserl, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, prompting *Times* columnist Peter Steinfels to remark: "To hear the name Merleau-Ponty trip off the tongue of a major American politician is surely extraordinary. Whether it is a qualification to be president is an entirely different matter."

Gore is clearly reaching out to religious constituencies early in the 2000 campaign for the presidency. Will the move help him or hurt him? Gore is convinced he has no choice. Asked if he was trying to take the religious issue away from conservatives, he responded: "No, I am just trying to be who I am." In response to a question about his personal faith, the vice-president said that "faith is the center of my life" and that he turns to that faith to deal with the important questions. A year of theological study at Vanderbilt (which followed a year of military service in Vietnam) helped him, he says, to explore questions about his relationship to God and about his obligations to others.

It is hard to imagine that even so overt a religious believer as Jimmy Carter would have met with religious reporters at the start of his race for the presidency. That Gore is eager to do so suggests how much prominence religion has gained in politics

since 1976. For one thing, major media outlets now provide space to journalists who know something about religious institutions and theological questions—a sharp contrast to the Carter years when many reporters admitted they didn't understand Carter's talk of being "born again."

In Atlanta, Gore said that "ordinary Americans have decided to confront the fact that our severest challenges are not just material, but spiritual. Americans know that the fundamental change we need will require not only new policies, but more importantly a change of both our hearts and our minds." He denounced both "hollow secularism and right-wing religion." Both of these positions are "rigid," he said; "they are not where the new solutions lie. I believe strongly in the separation of church and state. But freedom of religion need not mean freedom from religion. There is a better way."

In charting the better way, Gore proposes to start with endorsing the "charitable choice" provision of the 1996 welfare reform law, which, as Gore says, allows states to "enlist faith-based organizations to provide basic welfare services, and help move people from welfare to work."

Ironically, the charitable choice provision was written into the welfare law by a Republican conservative, Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri, who for a while contemplated running for the Republican presidential nomination as a candidate from the Religious Right. The law is designed to assure religious organizations that they don't have to deny their core religious beliefs when they accept government money for providing social services. The law states that religious groups may receive funds "without impairing the religious character of such organizations, and without diminishing the religious freedom of beneficiaries of assistance funded under such programs."

But many mainline religious groups are uneasy for First Amendment reasons about religious groups using the charitable choice provision. They worry that tax dollars in the hands of religious organizations breach the "wall of separation" between church and state, and that government-funded programs will be linked to efforts at religious conversion.

Gore is aware of such criticisms and of the risks to church-state separation in his position. Charitable choice programs, he agrees, need safeguards to protect tax dollars from being used for evangelistic purposes. The law does require that before

religious groups are granted funding, there must be secular options available for those who prefer them.

In his Atlanta remarks Gore made this pledge: "If you elect me president, the voices of faith-based organizations will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration." So convinced is he of the importance of this partnership that he wants to expand charitable choice beyond welfare reform to include programs to combat drug abuse, homelessness and youth violence.

Gore says the Littleton murders showed Americans that new ways of confronting evil have to be found. After Columbine, he says, there is "much soul-searching" and a "spiritual hunger." Gore is willing, at some political risk from his liberal constituencies, to call for a partnership between governments and faith communities that will "reconnect the American spirit to the body politic."