

Democratic virtues: Straddling the worlds of religion and politics

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

This magazine has long straddled the world of religion and politics, convinced that political awareness and engagement are part of faithful Christian living. We do so knowing full well that this territory is highly contested. One of the ways we gauge success is by whether we get criticism from different ends of the political spectrum. That happens a lot. The right is often convinced that we are a mouthpiece for the old left. The left takes us to task for being far too soft on a range of issues.

In this issue editor-at-large [Robin Lovin surveys](#) some of the liveliest current arguments on the place of religion in democratic society and on the role particular religious commitments play in a pluralistic society. The prominent figures in the conversation are Jeffrey Stout, Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty.

I'm intrigued by Stout's vision of a secular democracy—how can there be any other kind, given our radical diversity?—as “a plurality of communities of virtue that engage with one another to order the common life.” I think he's right in suggesting that the challenge before us is to live with different and in some way competing visions of what a “good society” is.

This issue will be before us in a major way in the next six months. Both presidential candidates belong to Christian churches. President Bush is a United Methodist with close ties to the evangelical world that transcends denominations. The presumptive Democratic candidate, John Kerry, is a Roman Catholic and attends mass regularly.

Interestingly, both candidates have come in conflict with church leaders—the president on the issues of Iraq and tax policy, Senator Kerry because of his positions on stem cell research and abortion. In fact, some Catholic leaders talk of denying Kerry the Eucharist because some of his positions contradict church teaching.

The first election I voted in was when John F. Kennedy was elected. I remember how concerned some people were that a Catholic president might take orders from the Vatican. I also recall Kennedy's promise to be a president who was Catholic, not a Catholic president.

This year's candidates may not read Jeffrey Stout's book, but I pray that in the days ahead they will be moved by Lovin's creative challenge: "We have to preach virtues that in some ways set Christians at odds with their society and their neighbors, and still send them out to work with those neighbors to make society better."