

Leaving Jesus behind: Christians in politics

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

A few months ago a friend told me about a conversation he'd had with an atheist in Colorado Springs. That Colorado city, the Mecca of American evangelical Christianity, may be the last place an atheist would feel at home. But there he was, right in the middle of a lion's den. My friend had met him and started talking to him about Jesus. The man was interested. Even those who feel that facing a Christian is like being a piece of meat held out to hungry lions are often attracted to Jesus. After they had studied the Gospels for a few weeks, the atheist's fascination with Jesus grew, but he was puzzled about his spiritual guide. "What kind of Christian are you?" he inquired of my friend. "If you really want to slap a label on me, it should probably be 'evangelical,'" my friend said. "You can't be an evangelical," responded his interlocutor. "You are talking about Jesus!"

The story was a revelation for me. Evangelicals who belong to the religious right insist that Jesus is their Lord and Savior, yet many of them hardly ever talk about Jesus, at least not in public. They talk about politics—how to get their people elected to local, state and federal governments so as to advance their religious, moral and political causes. They pour their energy into political battles and have none left for Jesus. If you were to point this out to them, they'd vehemently disagree, telling you that they wage political wars for Jesus and in his name. But Jesus is no longer at the center of their attention. The struggle for power has taken his place. They are political warriors in religious garb, not followers of Jesus. It took a religious outsider to name what was going on among the seemingly most devout.

There are many ways of leaving Jesus behind. Take the famous Left Behind series. Jesus is all over these books. But what kind of Jesus? As I was flipping through the pages of the series, I felt I was more in the world of Terminator movies than in the world of the Gospels or even the world of the book of Revelation. Violent struggle dominates the imagination of the writers, struggle carried out with the most deadly weapons of the flesh. Jesus—the Jesus who came to redeem the world by the power

of his self-giving love and demanded that his would-be followers walk in his footsteps—is nowhere to be seen. Overcoming the assaults of the godless enemy by the power of sacrificial witness to the point of shedding one's own blood! Martyrs of the ancient book of Revelation have morphed into Left Behind's ruthless warriors. And where is Jesus in all this? He is there, but not as the Jesus who loves enemies and justifies the ungodly. That Jesus has been discarded for the Rider on the White Horse. Never mind that the whole New Testament is united in this crucial point: to follow Christ means to love enemies, not to eliminate them.

I am not sure which is worse, trading Jesus for political warring or transmuting him into the image of our own violent selves. In a sense, both amount to leaving Jesus behind.

Think of the irony. The religious right is abandoning Jesus! The charge that the religious left has abandoned Jesus for its pet political causes has been the religious right's standard line of attack against its enemies for quite some time. That charge isn't unjustified, of course. There is a consistent pattern in the ways many theological liberals have thought about Jesus: Out with the Jesus of the Gospels and in with the historically reconstructed Jesus—which is to say, out with the Jesus who is a stranger to us and can challenge our prejudices and in with a Jesus who is cast in our own image and fits with what is politically expedient. It does not seem to help to point this danger out, as many have done. You like what you like, and if you are at liberty to construe Jesus—which is what much of the reconstruction of the “historical” Jesus amounts to—you'll construe him to your liking.

Others on the religious left have chosen not to reconstruct Jesus, but to disregard him. I've sat through many sermons that were all about this or that cause, and about how this or that social or psychic technique will solve the problem if only we would roll up our sleeves. It is not that I disliked the causes on the whole, but I kept wondering, Where is Jesus in all this? At best I could hear distant echoes of the spirit of Jesus translated into a modern idiom. Social causes were garnering our respect, not the concrete person Jesus.

Complaints that the religious left has abandoned Jesus are not new. Now the religious right has fashioned itself in the inverted image of the religious left. If this is even roughly correct, the writing on the wall is spelling the doom of the religious right. Just think of this: the political power of the religious right is parasitic on its religious power, and its religious power is the direct result of the erstwhile centrality

of Jesus in the life of its communities. Discard Jesus and you've not only foolishly replaced the one true God with idols of your own making; you've also cut off the branch on which you sit as a political actor.

The challenge for a religious right and a religious left that want to think of themselves as Christian is to show that Jesus matters more than politics. Only then will both be true leaven in the world of politics.