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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

When the Personal Shouldn't Be Political

By GARY HART

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Kittredge, Colo. — If America has entered one of its periodic eras of religious revival and if that revival is having the profound impact on politics that is now presumed, to participate in a discussion of "faith" one must qualify oneself.

I was raised in the Church of the Nazarene, an evangelical denomination founded a century ago as an offshoot of American Methodism, which, the church founders believed, had become too liberal. I graduated from Bethany Nazarene College, where I met and married my wife, who was also brought up in the church. I then graduated from the Yale Divinity School as preparation for a life of teaching religion and philosophy.

The Nazarene Church abhorred drinking, smoking, dancing, movies and female adornment, believed in salvation through being "born again" and in sanctification as a second act of grace, and resisted most popular culture as the devil's work. In doctrine and practice, it was much more evangelical than fundamentalist.

A neglected thread of church doctrine was the social gospel of John and Charles Wesley, the great reformers of late 18th-century Methodism. The Wesley brothers preached salvation through grace but also preached the duty of Christians, based solidly on Jesus' teachings, to minister to those less fortunate. My political philosophy springs directly from Jesus' teachings and is the reason I became active in the Democratic Party. Finally, in the qualification-to-speak category, I will seek to pre-empt the ad hominem disqualifiers. I am a sinner. I only ask for the same degree of forgiveness from my many critics that they were willing to grant George W. Bush for his transgressions.

As a candidate for public office, I chose not to place my beliefs in the center of my appeal for support because I am also a Jeffersonian; that is to say, I believe that one's religious beliefs - though they will and should affect one's outlook on public policy and life - are personal and that America is a secular, not a theocratic, republic. Because of this, it should concern us that declarations of "faith" are quickly becoming a condition for seeking public office.

Declarations of "faith" are abstractions that permit both voters and candidates to fill in the blanks with their own religious beliefs. There are two dangers here. One is the merging of church and state. The other is rank hypocrisy. Having claimed moral authority to achieve political victory, religious conservatives should be very careful, in their administration of

the public trust, to live up to the standards they have claimed for themselves. They should also be called upon to address the teachings of Jesus and the prophets concerning care for the poor, the barriers that wealth presents to entering heaven, the blessings on the peacemakers, and the belief that no person should be left behind.

If we are to insert "faith" into the public dialogue more directly and assertively, let's not be selective. Let's go all the way. Let's not just define "faith" in terms of the law and judgment; let's define it also in terms of love, caring, forgiveness. Compassionate conservatives can believe social ills should be addressed by charity and the private sector; liberals can believe that the government has a role to play in correcting social injustice. But both can agree that human need, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy and sickness must be addressed. Liberals are not against religion. They are against hypocrisy, exclusion and judgmentalism. They resist the notion that one side or the other possesses "the truth" to the exclusion of others. There is a great difference between Cotton Mather and John Wesley.

There is also the disturbing tendency to insert theocratic principles into the vision of America's role in the world. There is evil in the world. Nowhere in our Constitution or founding documents is there support for the proposition that the United States was given a special dispensation to eliminate it. Surely Saddam Hussein was an evil dictator. But there are quite a few of those still around and no one is advocating eliminating them. Neither Washington, Adams, Madison nor Jefferson saw America as the world's avenging angel. Any notion of going abroad seeking demons to destroy concerned them above all else. Mr. Bush's venture into crusaderism frightened not only Muslims, it also frightened a very large number of Americans with a sense of their own history.

The religions of Abraham all teach a sense of personal and collective humility. It was a note briefly struck very early by Mr. Bush and largely abandoned thereafter. It would be well for those in the second Bush term to ponder that attribute. Whether Bush supporters care or not, people around the world now see America as arrogant, self-righteous and superior. These are not qualities of any traditional faith I am aware of.

If faith now drives our politics, at the very least let's make it a faith of inclusion, genuine compassion, humility, justice and accountability. In the words of the prophet Micah: "He hath shown thee, O man, what is good. What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" And, instead of "O man," let's insert "O America."

Gary Hart, the former Democratic senator from Colorado, is the author, most recently, of "The Fourth Power: A Grand Strategy for the United States in the 21st Century."

POLICY

Sojourner's sign campaign

August 2004

We are not single-issue voters.

We believe that poverty - caring for the poor and vulnerable - is a religious issue. Do the candidates' budget and tax policies reward the rich or show compassion for poor families? Do their foreign policies include fair trade and debt cancellation for the poorest countries? ([Matthew 25: 35-40](#), [Isaiah 10:1-2](#))

We believe that the environment - caring for God's earth - is a religious issue. Do the candidates' policies protect the creation or serve corporate interests that damage it? ([Genesis 2:15](#), [Psalm 24:1](#))

We believe that war - and our call to be peacemakers - is a religious issue. Do the candidates' policies pursue "wars of choice" or respect international law and cooperation in responding to real global threats? ([Matthew 5:9](#))

We believe that truth-telling is a religious issue. Do the candidates tell the truth in justifying war and in other foreign and domestic policies? ([John 8:32](#))

We believe that human rights - respecting the image of God in every person - is a religious issue. How do the candidates propose to change the attitudes and policies that led to the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners? ([Genesis 1:27](#))

We believe that our response to terrorism is a religious issue. Do the candidates adopt the dangerous language of righteous empire in the war on terrorism and confuse the roles of God, church, and nation? Do the candidates see evil only in our enemies but never in our own policies? ([Matthew 6:33](#), [Proverbs 8:12-13](#))

We believe that a consistent ethic of human life is a religious issue. Do the candidates' positions on abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, weapons of mass destruction, HIV/AIDS-and other pandemics-and genocide around the world obey the biblical injunction to choose life? ([Deuteronomy 30:19](#))

We also admonish both parties and candidates to avoid the exploitation of religion or our congregations for partisan political purposes.

By signing this statement, we call Christians and other people of faith to a more

thoughtful involvement in this election, rather than claiming God's endorsement of any candidate.

This is the meaning of responsible Christian citizenship.

Seattle Times

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK**

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TIMES NEWS TRACKER

ALLENTOWN, Pa., Oct. 27 - With one Sunday left before the election, conservative churches and Christian groups are rallying their members with a singularly intense battle cry: that this presidential race, more than any before, is a contest pitting faithful of all kinds against unbelievers.

"I see it as a spiritual divide between true believers and seculars," said Neil E. Kulp, pastor of First Baptist Church, echoing comments made in dozens of other interviews. "I think we as a nation are more divided now than we were just prior to the Civil War," Mr. Kulp said.

The news service of the Christian Broadcasting Network, citing polls, recently summed it up another way: "Those who pray a lot tend to vote Republican. Those who don't tend to vote Democrat."

Inspired by that conviction and by the closeness of the presidential race, conservative pastors are preaching sermons about voting, distributing millions of pointed voter's guides for Protestants and Catholics, organizing phone banks and mass e-mailings, and improvising more innovative tactics.

A Hispanic Pentecostal church here set up a practice booth for novice voters, and a Florida mega-church is passing out rubber wristbands labeled W.W.J.V., for "Why Would Jesus Vote?"

At a prayer meeting here Wednesday night, Mr. Kulp led a dozen parishioners in thinly veiled prayers for [President Bush's](#) re-election. He prayed that God might do "whatever it takes on Election Day," including keeping some voters away while "bringing certain people to the polls." One parishioner prayed that members of other churches, synagogues and houses of worship turn out as well. "Lord," another prayed, "for Mr. Kerry, I don't know whether he knows you or not. I pray he would know that being in a relationship with you is more important than being president."

Pollsters, political scientists and conservative organizers say the election is the strongest manifestation yet of a two-decade-old shift away from the allegiance of different religious groups to each party toward an overriding gap between ardent traditionalists and the more secular. Rhetoric pitting the most observant against the least is spreading beyond a core of white evangelical Protestants to other denominations, conservative Catholics, black and Hispanic Protestant churches and even some Jewish groups.

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Many conservative Christians say part of the reason is the contrast between Mr. Bush's openness and [Senator John Kerry's](#) reticence on the subject of faith. They say another reason is the confluence of social issues like same-sex marriage and embryonic stem cell research with the expectation of vacancies on the Supreme Court. But pollsters and political scientists say that, more than in any other presidential election, the Bush campaign and its allies have tried to capitalize on what some call "the God gap." Although Mr. Bush often emphasizes tolerance and inclusiveness, the grass-roots campaign has in some ways fulfilled the conservative Pat Buchanan's widely panned description at the 1992 Republican convention of a "religious war going on in our country for the soul of America."

Here in Allentown, the most closely contested district in a major swing state, a Bush supporter independently took out a billboard reading simply, "Bush Cheney 04 - One Nation Under God." Republican party mailings in two Southern states suggested that Democrats would ban the Bible, and the party has retained David Barton, a proponent of the idea that America is a "Christian nation," to speak to groups of pastors.

About a week ago, Mr. Bush met with Cardinal Justin Rigali, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia, in his latest attempt to shore up Catholic support in Pennsylvania, and earlier this month officials of his campaign met with African-American pastors in Toledo, Ohio. At the Republican convention, the party was even host to its first gathering explicitly for Orthodox Jews, a sliver of the electorate that has now swung decisively in Mr. Bush's favor.

"It is a very, very concerted effort from the Republican side like we have never seen before," said Luis E. Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, of the efforts to take advantage of the religious-secular divide. "There is no question that Bush and his people have played up and helped to solidify that trend."

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