

# COLUMNISTS

## Religion and politics in America

Does religion belong in a presidential campaign? Yes, if it has a direct bearing on public policy. No, if it's a ploy to win votes or promotes one religion over others.

Nowhere was religion — and the Christian religion in particular — more in evidence than in last month's Iowa debate involving the six Republican presidential candidates. When asked to name their favorite philosopher, Gov. George W. Bush, Gary Bauer, and Sen. Orrin Hatch all cited Christ.

Later, Sen. John McCain began broadcasting a radio advertisement in South Carolina in which one of his fellow prisoners in North Vietnam recalled a Christmas sermon the senator had composed in captivity: "It was certainly a shot to everyone's morale to hear those Christian words in that very un-Christian-like place."

On the Democratic side, Vice President Albert Gore has introduced a new television commercial in which the announcer refers to his studies in religion at Vanderbilt. In an earlier interview on the CBS program "Sixty Minutes," the Vice President pointed out that he is a born-again Christian. He also joined Gov. Bush in arguing that faith-based organizations might serve as a conduit for distributing government assistance to the needy.

The readiness of some presidential candidates to draw religion into their



essays in  
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

campaigns may impress many potential voters, particularly evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants in the South, but it is a turn-off to many others.

The Episcopal bishop in Iowa used that very word "turn-off" to describe his own reaction to the GOP debate. He found the references to Christ "a little awkward, a little forced," and expressed a concern that "there's going to be a heavy-handed Christianity in the White House." New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd referred to it as "playing the Jesus card." "This is the era of niche marketing," she wrote, "and Jesus is a niche."

The bishop was critical of Vice President Gore as well, specifically his support for faith-based outreach. "There can be a healthy partnership between the church and the government," the bishop acknowledged, but he worries about governmental "stipulations and restrictions" that might be imposed on religious organizations.

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, was also critical of the references to Christ in the Iowa debate. "I felt left out, and I think a lot of Americans felt left out," he said.

Some of the criticisms, however, have been clearly wide of the mark, and particularly those which insist that religion has no place in politics because it is a "private and personal" matter. Our first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, may have contributed to a broader acceptance of that view in seeking to assure skeptical non-Catholics that he'd never try to impose his own private religious beliefs on the rest of the nation.

But religion is more than a private affair. It affects the way we relate to one another and provides motivation for reaching out to those in need.

It also generates a set of values that are the basis of a religious community's criticisms and/or support of economic and social systems, of various cultural expressions, and of political behavior, not just of individual politicians but of governmental policies and programs at all levels.

While our relationship with God is profoundly personal and private, it is also communal and social. There is a time for private prayer, and there is a time for public prayer. Both are essential.

The Second Vatican Council referred to the public prayer of the church as the

summit and source of its whole life and mission.

It is a long way, however, from this vision of the public character of religion to a politician's appeal to religion in an election campaign. Indeed, it may be easier to understand the negative reaction to Gov. Bush's reference to Christ when his comments are viewed in the light of a remark he made in 1993 that one must believe in Jesus Christ to get to heaven. The governor later backed away from that statement, but the impact lingers.

Just before Christmas the head of the Catholic League, a private watchdog organization that protests perceived slights against the Catholic Church in the media, said on Chris Matthews's cable program "Hardball" that he objected to the criticisms being voiced (by writers like Maureen Dowd) about appeals to Christ in this presidential campaign.

The spokesman, William Donahue, pointed out that Christians are in the overwhelming majority in this country and that they have as many rights as do minorities. Matthews confessed that Mr. Donahue was expressing what was in his own "gut."

Fortunately, the First Amendment's no-establishment clause emerged from James Madison's mind, not his "gut."

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## How to act on Jubilee initiatives?

I'm way behind everybody else in understanding what all this talk about a "Jubilee Year" is. Wherever I go, people seem to be talking about it. Since I don't want to be left out, I decided to investigate the thing for myself. I phoned the Pastoral Office and was sent a whole envelope of information; since then, I've been studying the notion with gusto.

What I've learned so far is that the whole idea emerged from the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, and that some passages there refer to a jubilee that was observed every 50 years. The Book of Leviticus talks about a general hallowing of the 50th year, during which liberty is proclaimed to all the inhabitants. Pope John Paul II has written an apostolic letter in which he cites Leviticus 25:10 and another passage from the Hebrew Bible as foundational for our understanding of jubilee. This second passage is from Psalm 72: "God delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helpers. God has pity on the weak and needy, and 'saves the lives of the needy'" (verses 12-13).

Apparently the Christian church adopted this idea of jubilee, and the tradition evolved until we took up the habit of observing a jubilee year every 25th year. That's what we're up to now. From what I can gather, we are to strive for both an interior and outward renewal of sorts. That alone is quite interesting to me since I so often equate what's "religious" with what's entirely spiritual, personal, and thus exclusively interior. But in his letter, Pope John Paul writes: "The term jubilee speaks of joy, not just an inner joy but ju-



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

bilation which is manifested outwardly, for the coming of God is also an outward, visible, audible and tangible event, as St. John makes clear (cf. 1 Jn 1:1).

Regarding this outward and visible dimension of the jubilee, observance of the Jubilee Year encourages us to engage in contemporary causes that exemplify ancient scriptural passages. "Let the land lie fallow," for example, is being translated in modern terms to invite us to learn and do more about preserving the environment and modifying our own economic choices. So we ourselves contribute less to environmental destruction. That's good advice anytime, but all the "jubilee talk" offers us a motivational opportunity to actually do it.

Two other ancient scriptural texts are used as jubilee themes as well. Like the notion of the "fallow land" these two are being updated with modern applications as well. They are: "Bring good news to the oppressed," and "Set the slaves free and proclaim liberty to captives." For these two, we are encouraged to take up the cause of those who are oppressed in our own world and become sources of

good news to them. Some extra learning about who are the actual outsiders among us, or who now are being kept from enjoying the wealth and benefits of society is prescribed, as is personal adoption of a plan to take up some action to change the situation in some small way.

Taking ancient phrases and trying to realize their meaning for today is often pretty tricky business, and I must confess that on several occasions I've become a bit overwhelmed by all the material I've been studying as I try to take these phrases and investigate what they might mean for me this year. As I began to think about freeing slaves and bringing liberty to captives, for example, I found myself reading from the books of various Old Testament prophets. I'm always struck by these writings, especially when I slacken off and think our faith offers us primarily consolation in the midst of hectic lives, or sweet anticipations of the afterlife to come. These books offer anything but those things. These writings are, in the words of Maria Harris in her book *Proclaim Jubilee*, p.79, "passionate, tempestuous, hotheaded, and most of all, immediately necessary." These writings give us a clear picture of the way societies long ago managed to exclude some among them, oppress some among them, and cause some of their members to be enslaved. Harris helps to bring these observations from long ago into contemporary terms when she cites Rabbi Heschel, who has made the point: "The things that horrify the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world" (Harris p.77).

Having read a bit of the Prophets, a bit from the Pope, one book and several pamphlets, I'm starting to think that this jubilee idea is pretty serious. I'm still not entirely clear about either the interior attitudes I should try to nurture this year or the outward practices I should take up. I'm not entirely sure that I know how to take ancient ideas and apply them to situations I know about today. I do think, however, that having these kinds of ideas even "in the back of our minds" can cause us to think differently about things that are parts of our ordinary life. They can even help us to be "appropriately uncomfortable" about things we've begun to take for granted.

This morning, for example, the top newspaper headline was "Income gap widest in N.Y." We learned there that the incomes of the richest fifth of New York families rose by 15% in the last decade or so, and that the poorest fifth saw a 15% decline in income. This is strange news for those of us used to hearing about "our booming economy." The article cites a source who cites flattening tax rates of the past 20 years which have made it easier the rich to get richer. Imagine a whole bunch of "jubilee-trained Catholics" working together to get the taxation system adjusted so that it favors those at the bottom of the economic ladder rather than those at the top! Maybe, just maybe, that's the kind of thing that the old passages call today's worshipers to think about.

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## Retirement Special Edition coming March 23, 2000

This special edition will profile senior citizens who have embraced the unique possibilities and challenges posed by "the golden years." It will also explore such topics as financial planning and money management, travel, volunteering in church and community, and maintaining good health — providing an ideal environment in which to promote related programs and services.