

Faith in the White House

First, a disclaimer: I am the author of a book on President Bush's faith and hence can legitimately be suspected of having a bias in favor of Bush in the current presidential election campaign. I admit, I do.

Second, I do not normally write about politics at all. That is not because it doesn't interest me; it does, greatly. But I think Christians writing in Christian magazines ought to avoid, wherever possible, partisan positions. I have always maintained that Christians have a right to, and should, disagree with one another. I think that anybody else's political views may well be as valid, in the kingdom of God sense, as mine.

Since, however, we happen to have a president who is rather outspoken about his faith, and since so many people seem to be angry about this fact, it's probably time for certain things to be put into context.

Obviously, God is neither Democratic nor Republican. Neither political party has a monopoly on morality or righteousness, or even common sense. Two of the most outspoken Christian presidents of the 20th century were, in fact, Democrats, and both—Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter—won the Nobel Peace Prize.

In recent presidential campaigns it was Jimmy Carter, also a Democrat—not any Republican candidate—who first made a major issue of his Christianity. It is generally believed, moreover, that Carter secured a large part of the evangelical Christian

vote in 1976 but forfeited it four years later to his opponent, Ronald Reagan.

Thus, at least in the last three decades, the White House contender for the Democratic Party has been a committed, indeed evangelical, Christian.

What has become radically different in America since the elections of the 1970s is that militant secular forces have gravitated to the Democratic Party and have tried hard to use it as a vehicle to press the culture in a more secular direction. For issues ranging from abortion to gay rights to stem-cell research, the party most in favor of a move away from traditional faith positions on these controversies has been the Democratic Party.

Though it needs to be said that Democratic presidents sometimes act with gratifying clarity on behalf of the faith community—President Clinton's clear policy on religious free-exercise in public schools is one example—it is also true that it is becoming increasingly difficult for Democratic Party leaders to be outspoken men and women of faith. It just isn't very popular.

Besides, Democrats opposed to a Republican incumbent tend to attract activists who are even more liberal than the average person. (The converse is true of conservatives, of course: In 1964 Barry Goldwater and his followers were well to the right of the American mainstream when Goldwater was the Republican candidate opposing Democratic incumbent Lyndon Johnson).

This election, coming at a time when the nation is at war, is undoubtedly a very important one. There are thus grounds for

Christians in America to want to know how firm is the faith of whoever will be the next resident of the White House.

One is the likelihood that vacancies in the U.S. Supreme Court will occur during the next administration. Because so many decisions on moral and cultural issues are made today by judges rather than elected legislators it matters a great deal what sort of people will be nominated to the Supreme Court. Perhaps more compelling is, which political party will control the Senate when confirmation hearings for those new justices are held?

Another is foreign policy. It will matter enormously in the next administration whether or not the elected president has moral clarity and is truly decisive. If our nation continues to be at risk from terrorist attack, we will need a president who can make courageous and sometimes risky decisions.

We should certainly wish well for, and pray for, whoever is elected president in November 2004. But I venture to suggest that for many American Christians the choice of whom to vote for may well boil down to which candidate seems most comfortable on his knees.

After all, that's the best place in the world to get wisdom, courage and humility. And don't we all want our president to possess these things?

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