

The Quiet Faith of Condoleezza Rice

Liberal politicians hate her policies. Critics of the Iraq War despise her loyalty to President Bush.

But America's most prominent woman in government says her faith in Christ is at the core of her identity.

She's been called the devil's handmaiden, a history-maker, a rock star, Bush's secret weapon, the most influential woman in the world, a rising star, a murderer (due to the death toll in Iraq) and a traitor to her race, among other things.

Typically, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice seems to contemplate neither the compliments nor the criticism. But after discussing her faith, the nation's most powerful woman began to worry about the perception that she might be viewed as vulnerable, exposed even.

Rice's religious roots run deep. Raised in a Christian home, Rice says she has never known a day when she did not believe in God. Her father, John, was a Presbyterian pastor who took over the church his father planted in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1920. Her mother, Angelenia, was a teacher and also had a solid Christian heritage and an intense love for God.

Together the couple planned to have one child and pour everything they had into her. So when Rice asked for her own piano at age 3, her parents told her they'd get one if she learned how to play. Determined and focused, the toddler approached her maternal grandmother, who taught piano, and

boldly asked her to give her lessons. Eight hours later, Rice could play “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

“My grandmother taught me that song because she and my grandfather were people of faith and, like my parents, wanted me to have a firm foundation in Christ,” Rice says. “That night, after I spent eight hours learning the song, I played it for my parents.”

In response, John and Angelena went out the following weekend and rented a piano for their daughter to learn on. Whatever it was—ice skating, flute, French, violin, dance or ballet—the Rices provided the money, time and effort needed, often going without themselves, to help their daughter succeed.

Like most other African-American families during the Civil Rights era, the Rices went to church on Sundays. But though she attended worship services every week, Rice says she can’t pinpoint the moment of her conversion experience. “I can honestly say, without exaggeration, that not a single day of my life have I doubted the existence of God,” Rice says. “For me, that was never a question, especially in my home.”

Although there were many adults who spoke into her life, Rice says her father had the most spiritual influence on her. “My father was a theologian, a doctor of divinity,” she says. “He was someone who let you argue about things.

“He didn’t say, ‘Just accept it.’ And when I had questions, which we all do, he encouraged that. He allowed me as someone who lives in my mind to also live in my faith.”

Rice’s faith was instilled in her from childhood, but she says

there were some defining moments that shaped her belief system. When she was 8 years old, two of her friends were killed in the infamous 16th Street Baptist Church bombing.

Knowing that her father often spent nights with other neighborhood men patrolling their cul-de-sac against the Ku Klux Klan, Rice came to believe that God was in control and that He had special plans for her and her life that included liberation, spiritually and physically.

Perhaps one of the strongest tests of her faith was when Rice was 15 and her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. "When I found out that my mother first had cancer ... I found myself asking an endless amount of questions that, for the first time in my life, no one had pat answers for," she remembers.

"My father told me that when the results of my mother's first surgery came back, he got down on his knees and prayed, 'Lord, how am I going to raise a 15-year-old girl alone?' My father and I prayed that she might live to see me grow up."

Angelena got better and lived another 15 years before the breast cancer consumed her body.

Rediscovering Faith

During those tender years following her mother's first diagnosis, Rice succeeded in every way imaginable from the world's perspective. By age 26 she was an assistant professor at Stanford University, an expert in Soviet politics and traveled internationally more often than she was in the United States.

Too busy to go to church, Rice found her faith fading into the background of her life. Then one Sunday morning in a supermarket, Rice was approached by a stranger who asked if she played the piano.

When she answered him affirmatively, he asked her if she would help his church by playing for them because they'd recently lost their pianist. That divine appointment got her back to attending church regularly.

"I thought to myself, My goodness, God has a long reach," Rice says. "I mean, in the Lucky's Supermarket on a Sunday morning amongst the spices. As a result of going there and playing and getting involved again with the church community, I began to see how much of my faith ... I'd taken for granted."

It was a turning point in her life. Two years later her mother passed away, and Rice found herself standing at a crossroad with regard to her faith. Either God's Word was true and she could cling to Him in the darkest hours of life, or it was all just a fairy tale.

"When she died, I knew that I would not be able to move beyond her death because of my intellect and certainly not by the power of reason," Rice says. "Instead, I would have to trust God's Word ... [and] press in closer to Him. Only my faith in God could bridge the gap between what I was feeling and what I needed to do in dealing with my grief.

"I understood for the very first time in my life something I had heard in church many, many times: 'The peace that surpasses all understanding.' It is in those times when the intellect, when human will, when the ability to understand

with our feeble minds cannot serve us that the spirit takes over and somehow we survive.”

Shortly after Angelena’s death, Rice’s father joined his daughter in California. During the next few years, Rice moved back and forth between California and Washington, D.C., as she served in a variety of positions for President George H.W. Bush. In the meantime, her father met and married Clara Bailey, the principal of a performing arts school in Palo Alto, California.

After her father remarried, Rice returned to teaching at Stanford and was made provost in 1993. During her six-year tenure, Rice continued to attend church regularly and spoke at various organizations. Then, in 1998 Rice received a call from presidential candidate George W. Bush, who asked her to join him on the campaign trail as his adviser on foreign policy.

Stepping down from her position as provost, Rice joined Bush as he campaigned across the United States. She says that being with other believers on the campaign trail encouraged her in her faith. Then the unexpected occurred.

In February 2000, Rice received a phone call from her stepmother: John had suffered a severe attack of arrhythmia and was in the intensive care unit. Rice immediately returned to California. When her father stabilized days later, Rice bought a hospital bed, hired a team of aides to care for him and brought him home.

Six months later, from his bed, John watched his daughter accept the position of national security adviser under the new Bush administration. After accepting the position, Rice flew

home to be by her father's side. Three days later John suffered another attack of arrhythmia, and days later, on Christmas Eve, he died.

As she grieved her father's death, Rice says she learned three important truths that changed her life. "First, I [learned] that it is a privilege to struggle," she says. "Only through struggle do we realize the depth of our resilience and understand that the hardest of blows can be survived.

"There's a second truth about struggle: It can conquer you, or you can conquer it. Part of not allowing struggle to overcome our faith is attained by letting go of our own expectations and plans.

"There is a third truth in the privilege of struggle. You can find personal fulfillment and peace in times of pain and heartache. When God's power is full-strength because we are weak, that enables the Spirit of the Lord to rest on us. When we are weak, contemptible, persecuted, frustrated and painfully grieving because we are weak, He is strong."

Rice had no idea that God was strengthening her faith for a time when America would need it the most: after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. "I think after 9/11, we all needed our faith very, very strongly," Rice says.

"When you go through something like that, you have to turn to faith because you can't rationalize it. You can make an intellectual answer about it, but you can't fully accept it until you can feel it [in your heart]."

Grappling with the death of her father, she was now on

overload with 9/11. Rice prayed again and again about her crucial decisions. She became the most visible member of President Bush's Cabinet and was interviewed often by the media. She offered surety in a time of wavering, and she credited God for her strength.

"I feel that faith allows me to have a kind of optimism about the future," she says. "You look around you, and you see an awful lot of pain and suffering and things that are going wrong. It could be oppressive.

"But [then] I think, How could it possibly be that it has turned out this way? Then my only answer is, it's God's plan.

"And that makes me very optimistic that this is all working out in a proper way if we all stay close to God and pray and follow in His footsteps. I really do believe that God will never let you fall too far."

Bridging Faith and Reason

Three years later, for the second time President George W. Bush ran for office and won. He immediately nominated Rice for the position of secretary of state. It has not been an easy assignment and has kept her on both her toes and her knees.

Fifty-two and single, Rice aspires not to occupy the Oval Office but to return to academia after the 2008 election. She also hopes to focus her attention on developing spiritually.

"I'm one of God's worst planners," she admits. "But in the last year or so, I have been struggling with the fact that I

think I do need a plan for the development of my spiritual life. ... I think that there are really three aspects to this plan for me.

"The first is I have to have a better unity of faith and reason in my personal life, in my personal relationship with God. ...

"I have been religious all my life. ... I cannot remember a single day when I questioned the existence of God. My danger was quite another, and that is that if you are that certain in your religious faith, you go on autopilot about it. ... I, in fact, have sometimes wished I had been one of those people with a conversion experience when I was older and more competent to understand it because the danger to just 'let it ride,' if you will, not growing in your personal faith if you are as religious as I am, is very great.

"Now, the second part of this plan is to try to get closer to my church and my faith-based community. There are people in our church who are so much more advanced in their personal relationship with God, in their personal relationships with Jesus, who really believe that Jesus meets every one of them personally. People who are so much more advanced ... I need to draw on them.

"The most difficult and third part of my plan is to figure out what the role in all of this is of profession and proselytizing [and] being a contagious Christian," she continues. "I was really struck by the comment of a friend who read an article about me in the San Jose Mercury News.

"In this article it said that I was an evangelical Christian.

This very good friend of mine said, 'You know, that was a great article about you ... but you're not an evangelical Christian.' And I thought, Yeah, but I am. But I started wondering what was it about me that those words somehow in her mind didn't fit who I was. She knows I'm a Christian.

"Now, I think part of it may be, quite frankly, that we as evangelicals are increasingly speaking in ways ... that simply turns people off and when they meet one of us that they like, they can't possibly believe that we're actually evangelical."

Unlike most evangelicals in politics, Rice has not been outspoken about her views on abortion. She supports parental notification and a ban on late-term abortions but questions the role of government in the larger abortion debate. Though she has neither affirmed nor denounced gay marriage, she has cautioned Americans to debate the issue with sensitivity because "real human beings" are involved.

"I worry a lot about the government and the church ... about trying to legislate morality," she says. "I worry a lot that what we have done [as evangelicals] is to sound judgmental and exclusive in the way that we talk to people about the role of our faith. Whatever the issue—homosexuality or abortion or whatever—this tendency to speak in such loud and judgmental tones has really hurt the message that we're trying to deliver."

"In fact, what's very interesting to me is that if you think about the way that Christ tried to meet those who did not believe, it was quite opposite. He didn't shout at them. He tried to meet them where they were."

“And He met every person in a different place with a different way of dealing with it. For the young ruler, He was pretty tough. With the woman at the well, it was a much softer approach.

“And so shouting at people and judging them and browbeating them can’t be the right way to open up the possibilities of faith to them,” she continues.

“So I ask myself, What is? In part, [by] professing faith. I’m more comfortable giving a speech about faith than I am when I’m one-on-one with somebody trying to talk about faith and trying to open up that possibility to them, finding that I have to use faith and reason together in order to do it.

“[But] I have to do it one-on-one, and I have to be willing to talk about what faith means to me in a rational way. I have to be able to talk about what faith means to me day to day, and I have to be able to talk about why I believe.

“I know that whatever is ahead for me, the reason that I can be as excited as I am, really with very little trepidation, is [because I] believe that it was God’s plan for me to be where I am today and that God has a plan for me to be someplace in the future. And part of my bridging faith and reason is going to be [letting] Him lead where I can follow in a way that I hope my service serves His purpose, not just my own.”

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