



Red Faith/Blue Faith

Religion's Role in this Century's Presidential Elections

Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Sally Steenland | November 6, 2008

The past eight years have seen a dramatic transformation in the relationship between religion and politics. The watershed year was 2004, when the “God gap” is said to have reached its peak. In that year, post-election pollsters claimed that a significant majority of religious voters voted for politically conservative candidates rather than candidates who were progressive or liberal.¹

In fact, the “God gap” was somewhat of a mischaracterization. The truth is the gap resulted in part from exit-poll questions that limited “values” questions to a few wedge issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, rather than including other values choices such as poverty, the environment, and the Iraq war. Subsequent polling by Zogby, which did present a more expansive list of “values” issues, showed that religious voters were more culturally and politically diverse than the headlines claimed.²

Even so, as the God gap was re-examined, progressives became increasingly concerned that their policies were not connecting with faith voters—despite the fact that many of these policies were grounded in spiritual values. Soon after the 2004 election, a number of organizations and advocates began to address the problem in a focused way. The Center for American Progress hosted a meeting with a diverse group of faith leaders and began working with them to increase their organizational capacity and make their voices heard. CAP's Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative continued these efforts, helping to re-activate the progressive faith movement and strengthen collaboration with secular progressives on a wide range of social justice issues.

As part of this work, CAP helped bring into being new organizations dedicated to these goals. For instance, Faith in Public Life was created in 2005 to organize faith communities and amplify their voice on justice issues, from torture to global warming.³ FPL, in turn, identified and strengthened statewide faith-based groups, such as We Believe Ohio, bringing together diverse faith leaders in the community to work on issues of common concern. FPL has also helped create new faith-based groups around the country, such as We Believe Colorado. Another organization created in 2005 was Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, which focuses on promoting awareness of Catholic Social Tradition and its values of human dignity and justice.⁴

These groups joined long-standing faith organizations and leaders such as Jim Wallis of Sojourners,⁵ David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism,⁶ Rev. James Forbes of the Riverside Church,⁷ and many others to strengthen the progressive faith movement and increase its visibility. And so, in 2005 a book by Jim Wallis of Sojourners became a New York Times best seller. *God's Politics* offered biblically based arguments for fighting poverty, caring for the earth, opposing torture, and more. It was widely read and generated much discussion. Wallis's book was a clear reminder that being evangelical didn't mean one had to be politically conservative.

After the 2006 election, the strength and visibility of the progressive faith movement was no longer in question. By 2008, as Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama comfortably talked about their faith in debates and speeches, the distance progressives had traveled became clear. In the spring of 2008 both Clinton and Obama appeared at the Faith in Public Life "Compassion Forum" at Messiah College in Pennsylvania to answer questions from a diversity of faith leaders. The event was carried live by CNN and replayed several times, reaching millions of people. In August, Sens. Barack Obama (D-IL) and John McCain (R-AZ) appeared at Rev. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church to discuss leadership and faith.

Because of efforts such as these, there has been a sea change in perception and in reality regarding the face of religion in America. The values debate today is much broader. The grip of the religious right has weakened. Interfaith alliances that include evangelicals, Catholics, mainstream Protestants, African-American congregations, Jewish believers, Muslims, and others are working together and finding common ground.

For instance, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment brings together the National Council of Churches, the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to combat climate change and work on environmental sustainability and justice. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture includes over 200 faith groups working to end U.S.-sponsored torture and cruel inhuman treatment. Prominent Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars have joined together to publish "Abrahamic Alternatives to War," a comprehensive theological case for nonviolence.⁸ And the Christian coalition Call to Renewal works to overcome poverty nationwide.

Furthermore, in the spring of 2007, an influential group of evangelical leaders released the "Evangelical Manifesto," in which they declared independence from any political party, warned against religion being used for partisan ends, and reiterated a religious commitment to issues of poverty, human trafficking, and more.⁹

Polling data show that religious voters increasingly care about social justice issues. For instance, 70 percent of Catholic voters say they would vote for a candidate who works to solve global warming and 59 percent would vote for a candidate who supports universal health insurance.¹⁰ In addition, close to half of all young religious Americans support same-

sex marriage. The generation gap is also evident among young evangelicals who are much more likely than older evangelicals to support larger government that provides increased social services to address poverty issues (44 percent to 23 percent respectively).¹¹

Changes in 2008 and beyond

Early exit polls from the November 4 election show that Sen. Obama had greater support from religious voters than Sen. Kerry did in 2004. Among Catholics, the increase was 10 percent. Sen. Obama got 45 percent of the Protestant vote, 54 percent of the Catholic vote, and 78 percent of the Jewish vote.¹² In 2004, Sen. Kerry got 44 percent of the Protestant vote, 44 percent of the Catholic vote,¹³ and 76 percent of the Jewish vote.¹⁴ Among those who attend church weekly, 43 percent voted for Sen. Obama; in 2004, 36 percent voted for Sen. Kerry. Among those who attend church monthly, 53 percent voted for Sen. Obama, while 50 percent voted for Sen. Kerry.

This exit polling data suggests that the range of values issues of concern to voters continues to grow. For example, Hispanic voters polled a month before the election said they considered immigration to be as important a religious issue as abortion.¹⁵ The economy also is increasingly being seen as a moral issue by faith voters.¹⁶ Whether it rises to the top in polling data remains to be seen.

Many factors have contributed to the changing faith vote in the past four years. Evangelical faith communities have broadened their focus of concern to include issues such as the environment, poverty, and genocide. Interfaith groups have come together to forge common-ground approaches to abortion reduction, stem cell research, and other controversial issues. Progressive faith communities are reaching out to build new alliances with diverse partners within and beyond the faith community.¹⁷

Together, their voices are being heard. In just four short years, the progressive faith movement has made remarkable progress, connecting with its proud past of supporting abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights, to work on the social and economic justice issues of our day. The movement is reaching out to build alliances among secular citizens, evangelicals, and others, inspiring people and bringing them together across traditional divides on a host of issues where they share values and goals.

It is important for religious progressives to continue to expand their outreach to an ever-widening range of religious voters. In so doing, the progressive faith movement will be embracing the increasing diversity of religion in America, welcoming it as a strength and an opportunity to build new bridges and to see religion as a unifying force rather than a divisive weapon. In the challenging days ahead, as we face daunting problems at home and abroad, it is the responsibility of faith communities and their leaders to bring us together, enriching our national dialogue with purpose and possibility, and transforming words into actions, as we all join hands in the difficult work that lies ahead.

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Endnotes

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- 4 See: Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, available at <http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/>.
- 5 See: Sojourners, available at <http://www.sojo.net/>.
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Endnotes