

Faith-based politics: An exchange: On not mimicking the religious right

by [Jan G. Linn](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

The day after Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Barack Obama appeared at a June 4 candidates forum on faith and politics, sponsored by Sojourners/Call to Renewal and televised on CNN, Sojourners leader Jim Wallis wrote: “Last night, we made history. For the first time ever, leading presidential candidates gathered for a conversation focused on faith, values and poverty.” He had previously described the event as “a unique forum to ask questions not just about issues, but about values. Not just what policies the candidates propose, but why. Not just whether they believe privately, but about how they live out their faith in public life.”

On the surface this event would seem to be a good thing. But in the long run I would submit that the forum was not a victory for the faith community but is rather a sign that social-justice Christians are making the same mistakes that the Christian right has been making—with the nation and Christianity paying the long-term price.

I was heartened to hear that faith and prayer serve as a source of personal strength for these political leaders, but it completely escapes me how this affects their qualifications to be president. The Current Occupant says he is a born-again Christian and prays all the time, but I am not the only voter who thinks that neither of these traits has made him a competent and effective leader. The Christian right is determined to make being a Christian a qualification for public office. That Sojourner/Call to Renewal would play into this undermining of the religious neutrality of our form of government is something that every American should be alarmed about.

Wallis claims that the debate in this country has been too narrowly defined by the Christian right. But the candidates forum makes the situation worse. It is one thing to want to know if candidates are committed to economic, social and political justice. But to want to know the nature and degree of their faith oversteps boundaries that have served this nation since its founding. Article VI was included in the Constitution

for this very reason.

That Republican strategist Karl Rove has pandered to the religious right is not a reason for his opponents to do their own pandering. I say this not to disparage the integrity of the candidates, but to name the nature of the game they are playing.

I was among those Christians who reacted to the Christian right by joining “People of Faith for Kerry.” Our group met weekly, bought ads in newspapers across the state voicing our support for Kerry as Christians, and had T-shirts made that carried our message. I spent a large portion of my day at the Minnesota State Fair talking to people who stopped me because of the T-shirt I was wearing.

Looking back, I see this as a colossal blunder. I was committed to making a public statement that Christians could in fact be Democrats. But like members of the Christian right, we were aligning ourselves with partisan politics, leaving us vulnerable to the charge that what we believed in as Christians was nothing more than partisan politics. We ignored the fact that liberal politicians use religion to their political advantage just as conservatives do. The goal of the Kerry campaign in creating People of Faith for Kerry was to elect John Kerry. That, after all, is what political campaigns do.

It was not surprising that all the candidates at the forum and those interviewed by CNN’s Paula Zahn afterward used the occasion to assure us that they were people whose faith meant everything to them. Nor was it a shocker that the *Washington Post* article on the forum had a subtitle that read, “All Say Religion Informs Politics, Personal Lives.” Of course they did. They were looking for votes.

A couple of weeks before the 2004 election I was visiting my mother in Lynchburg, Virginia, my hometown, and was flipping through the television channels. I came upon the Liberty University channel. It was rebroadcasting the Sunday worship service at Thomas Road Baptist Church, where Jerry Falwell was enjoining his congregation “to vote Christian” in the upcoming election. He would describe an issue on which he believed the future of America depended and then say, “Don’t vote Republican or Democrat. Vote Christian.”

It wasn’t much of a leap to guess the candidate who would represent “voting Christian.” At one point he said, “People say they hate George Bush. Let me tell you something. They don’t hate him. They hate the Christ in him.” The congregation broke into applause.

Falwell's "vote Christian" line could just as easily describe the purpose of the Sojourners forum—the primary difference being the agenda that each was promoting. The issue is not whether Christians or members of any other religious group have the right to vote for candidates who share their faith and values. The question is whether the way Christians on the right and left are involved in politics undermines both our democracy and the faith communities they represent. With good reason many of us have believed that the Christian right has done so. I would suggest that any group that focuses on the faith of candidates as a qualification for public office will negatively affect government and religion, even if its agenda is one of social justice.

Some might respond by pointing to the example of the civil rights movement and the work of Martin Luther King Jr. King may have relied on scripture when he was preaching about racial and economic justice from a church pulpit. But when he spoke to the nation, he appealed to the rights of all U.S. citizens on the basis of the Constitution. He didn't want to know about political leaders' faith. He wanted to know how committed they were to following the laws of the land and to guaranteeing the rights of all people granted by the Constitution. There was no need to hold a religious forum to probe that question.

Given the state of religion and politics in the U.S. today, this kind of mixing of the two provides little to be gained by either. Had it wanted to effect a change in government policies regarding the poor, the leaders of the Sojourners conference might have used the event to focus on creating a national movement to implement term limits. Given the special interests to which Democrats and Republicans both pander, enacting term limits is the only way to truly change Washington politics. Only then will politicians understand that they are responsible to voters rather than to lobbyists.

As a lifelong Democrat and minister, I believe that our nation's founders were wise to want religion and politics to be separate. It is naive to think that providing candidates a forum to tell us what they know we want to hear is a way to change the moral agenda of the nation. To me the candidates forum on faith represented yet another wrong turn, and as C. S. Lewis once observed, when you've taken a wrong turn, then to continue going in the direction you're going gets you no nearer to where you want to be.

Read [*Jim Wallis's response*](#).