

The faith factor: Religion and presidential politics

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

Despite the attention given to religious issues in this year's presidential race, three public opinion experts have stated that the political force of faith and ethics questions has been overblown. Their assessment was not as blunt as the 1992 dictum "It's the economy, stupid!," but they came close.

National security, Iraq and the economy are "more decisive than social issues" for voters as November 2 nears, according to Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for People & the Press. Kohut delivered the verdict in a panel discussion at the four-day Religion Newswriters Association convention in Washington, D.C.

The Catholic vote? "I don't think Catholics pay any more attention to their leaders' pronouncements than do Protestants," said Kohut. He also said he saw one poll indicating that fewer than 50 percent of Catholics knew that the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, is Catholic.

The "Religious Left" vote? "I don't think there is such a bloc," said Anna Greenberg, vice president of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, noting also that polls say a candidate's stance on gay marriage is not crucial for voters choosing a president.

The third panelist, political scientist John C. Green of the University of Akron, cautioned the religion news specialists: "We can't forget that race, education, gender or economic status will often be the determination of how [people] vote."

That caveat from a well-regarded expert on religion and politics is all the more notable after months of criticisms of Kerry's abortion rights views by Catholic bishops and complaints by Democrats that President George W. Bush has manipulated his religiosity for voter appeal. Suspicions were even voiced during the Republican National Convention that the speaker's dais incorporated a subtle cross in its design.

Green directed the Pew Forum's newly released fourth annual National Survey of Religion and Politics, and discussed those findings at the September RNA meeting. Though interesting for its breakdown of "traditionalist, centrist and modernist" differences among U.S. Catholics, evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants, the survey yielded few surprises relating to the upcoming elections.

Focusing on the many political "spins" aimed this year either at religious or nonreligious voters, several speakers at the RNA gathering doubted, for instance, that a factual basis existed for White House strategist Karl Rove's claim that 4 million evangelical Christians did not vote in 2000. That figure has often been cited by Republicans to energize pro-Bush evangelicals to get out the vote. "I don't know where they got that figure," Kohut said. "It's highly speculative," added Green.

Lately, Bush has begun to downplay his faith, as if to combat what supporters say are exaggerations about his evangelical fervor—despite the president's past rhetoric and acknowledged affinity with conservative Protestants. That spin was evident in the keynote address to journalists.

As expected, keynoter Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, described the Bush administration's frustrations with those he called "some extreme secularist" Democrats in the Senate who have "punished the poor" by not passing a faith-based bill. But Towey also spoke at length on Bush's "mainstream America" approach to faith.

"Bush doesn't see himself as a role model Christian for others," Towey said. "He's commander in chief, not chaplain in chief." Towey added: "I haven't seen him lost in prayer or levitating. . . . If he was a healer, he'd fix his knees," alluding to a condition that prevents Bush from jogging. "I think President Bush uses religious language in speeches no more than other presidents [have]."

During the question period, Towey eventually asked to be excused for a staff meeting and invited a surprise speaker to finish for him. Up to the microphone came Kirbyjon Caldwell of Houston, pastor of United Methodism's largest church, who reportedly flew to Washington for that unscheduled appearance.

The African-American minister, regarded as a confidant to Bush, usually declines to say what the two Texans discuss. "I don't even talk about what he says I can talk about," said Caldwell, senior pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston. But his faith "is terribly misunderstood," he said. Contrary to some reports,

Bush “does not believe God told him to run,” or that God told him he would win, or to drop bombs. Asked if Bush believes in biblical inerrancy, Caldwell said, “I give him my position on the Bible; I don’t ask him his.”

The pastor’s care regarding public ties with the White House extends to his megachurch’s many social service programs. “We were doing faith-based work before it became popular, but I have not applied for federal funds during the Bush administration,” Caldwell said.

Underlining Bush’s close relationship with Caldwell, ex-*Time* magazine correspondent David Aikman said during another RNA panel that the only person that he “was not allowed” to interview for his recent book, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush*, was Caldwell—“because he knows too much.”

Aikman, like Towey and Caldwell, disputed some critical descriptions of Bush’s faith. “The cliché is that he is part of the evangelical right, but he is more complex than that,” Aikman said. “He doesn’t like to be called an evangelical, and ‘born again’ is a no-no because those terms raise flags.” Bush prefers that people call him “a follower of Christ,” he said.

Ethicist Shaun Casey of the United Methodist-related Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington lamented that Bush rarely attends church in the capital. “There are pastoral benefits to being active in a local church,” said Casey, formerly a pastor in the Churches of Christ. President Reagan did not associate with a Washington congregation during his two terms, and Aikman suggested that Reagan and Bush both felt their presence in churches would be too distracting.

Maureen Shea, who was President Bill Clinton’s liaison to religious communities from 1997 through 2000, countered that “the Clintons were able to go quietly to churches in Washington.” Shea, currently the director of government relations for the Episcopal Church, added, “I don’t worry so much about his attendance but whether he is following [church teachings].”

Casey also criticized Bush’s refusal to meet with mainline Protestant leaders who protested the war in Iraq. Aikman said that he did not know why Bush has not conferred with mainline Protestants on Iraq or other issues. “I think presidents ought to be open to differing theological views,” he said. Casey did praise Bush for reaching out to non-Christians after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. “After 9/11, you have to give George Bush credit for doing a much

better job at interfaith relations.”