

# Getting religion: Idolatrous invocations

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Democrats have to get religion. So argue the political pundits and analysts in the wake of the Democrats' defeat in November. As Al From, founder of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, observed: "You can't have everybody who goes to church vote Republican, you just can't."

With the reelection of a president, gains in both houses of Congress, and plans under way to reshape the Supreme Court, Republicans seem poised to exercise political dominance. George Bush, with the help of adviser Karl Rove, drew to the polls conservative Christians who wanted to show their opposition to gay marriage and abortion rights. The 4 million evangelicals who Rove says stayed home in 2000 came out in 2004 and brought their friends.

Conservative Christian voters used to support some Democratic candidates, or at least were open to their arguments. And liberal politics used to speak the language of faith. Many of the left's greatest political achievements—like the civil rights movement—drew on religious sentiment and language. The past two Democratic presidents could talk that language. And the issues the left cares about—health care, poverty, the environment, the pursuit of peace—cry out for theological articulation. If Democrats could only relearn the language of faith, they would be more electable. To fail to learn that language means accepting minority status.

All this is good political reasoning. Yet there is a grave danger lurking behind this interest in getting religion—the danger of treating "religion" as a means to some greater end rather than as a good in itself. To treat the invocation of God as a means of gaining political power is to commit the gravest of biblical offenses: idolatry.

Many liberals have complained that conservatives have simply used religion to court evangelical voters. If that's what conservatives have done, then it is hardly encouraging that liberals are preparing to do the same.

If appeals to religion, explicit or implicit, remain as prominent in politics as they currently are, then it makes sense for Democrats to talk more about religion and relate how their policies reflect their religious convictions. But it would be better for political discourse overall if politicians were to mute their “faith-based” claims and focus not so much on the source of their beliefs as on the impact of their policies. And it would be better if the members of Christian communities would become more skeptical of all attempts to identify a particular public policy as the most Christian one.