

The Jesus card: Campaign piety

From the Editors in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

Republican contenders for president met in Iowa recently to talk about politics and a testimonial broke out. When asked to identify his favorite philosopher-thinker, George W. Bush responded, "Christ, because he changed my heart." Gary Bauer concurred. Senator Orrin Hatch covered the more obvious political bases by naming Lincoln and Reagan, but took care to cite Christ as well. All the candidates, Alan Keyes and Steve Forbes included, made sure that the public understood the intimate connection between their personal religious convictions and their political agendas.

But such campaign forays into the spiritual have not been limited to the Iowa debate. Another Republican contender, Senator John McCain, has aired a radio advertisement that touts his preaching skills. Apparently when he was a POW in North Vietnam, McCain wrote a Christmas sermon which he shared with fellow prisoners. "It was certainly a shot to everyone's morale to hear those Christian words in that very unchristianlike place," one of McCain's mates-in-captivity says in the radio spot.

And not only Republicans are sharing their piety. Vice President Al Gore spoke of himself and his beliefs—he is a "born-again Christian"—in a December *60 Minutes* segment because, he said, he wanted "to be forthright and candid" about the real Al Gore.

On the positive side, such bold religious talk signals a healthy openness to expressions of faith in American politics. Religion is not merely a private matter; it should not be silenced by convention or force in the political realm. One only hopes that when Jewish, Muslim or Hindu candidates run for office they will feel as free to share their religious views with the voting public. One suspects, though, that those who are most furiously applauding the new political piety are not contemplating the possibility that other faith traditions may make a forceful showing in future political debates.

On the negative side, there's the issue of reducing faith to a campaign ploy. While one must hesitate long before questioning another's religious sincerity, it isn't only

the thoroughly jaded who suspect that some shrewd political calculation is going on. The Religious Right constitutes a significant bloc of votes that every Republican contender hopes to capture. Although there's little that Gore can do to appeal to these voters, in politics you burn as few bridges as possible.

To give the appearance, no matter how sincere one might be, that religion is being pitched to garner votes does a serious disservice to any faith. To manipulate religious conviction into a political commodity is a contemporary form of simony. The line is thin indeed between speaking openly about faith on the campaign trail and playing the Jesus card for political profit.

Given the risks of making faith a political issue, there's wisdom in heeding Karl Barth's admonition that "in the political sphere Christians can bring in their Christianity only anonymously." Barth also maintained that with regard to "authentically political questions which affect the development of the civil community, Christians can only reply in the form of decisions which could be the decisions of any other citizens."