

## Religion in a different voice; politics of a different tone

Joan Chittister | May. 29, 2006 From Where I Stand

Two issues consumed me this week: one an interview, the other a conference. They are distinct events but, I am convinced, very deeply connected, as well.

In the first event, an NPR interviewer out of Florida asked me a question about moral values ...”

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“Correction,” I interrupted her. “The last election was decided on *some*, on *a few* moral values. We ignored the rest of them.”

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The second event took place in Washington, D.C., May 17-20, the “Spiritual Activism Conference.”

To be perfectly honest, I really didn’t expect many people to come. It opened with an early morning session. What’s more, it was a kind of opening before the official opening of a three day event. At a jamboree like that, nobody goes to every session, however committed they may be.

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By the time I got there, 30 minutes before the session was to start, the church was packed to the rafters; more than 1,100 people were registered and walk-ins streamed in. It was a conference of “Spiritual Progressives,” almost all of them officially representing an organization rather than simply themselves.

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If there is any single phenomenon going on in the world of politics today, it is clearly the proliferation of small religiously inspired groups intent on relating public issues to traditional moral principles.

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The only difference between this situation and the national political world of the 2004 election is that this time the groups have a leftist, a liberal or a progressive bent -- depending on whatever euphemism appeals to you. Once caught off-guard by the political sophistication of the religious right -- the breadth and depth of its national organization and its single-issue public agenda -- progressive groups this time are clearly intent on providing another voice, a new accent to the language of religion on the national scene.

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Many of the liberal groups are long-established supporters of a traditional populist agenda: Tikkun, Sojourners, Pax Christi, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Many more are newcomers to the political scene, fresh and intent but small and basically separate from one another in everything but their common concerns about ecology, poverty, the social safety net, peace and U.S. foreign policy.

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The list of conference supporters itself was a clear reminder to those who substitute demographic dominance for political philosophy that the United States is not "a Christian nation." It is a nation founded "under God" which, for past historical reasons, is still a nation whose religious majority is predominantly Christian, yes, but even those are split into a myriad of creeds, liturgical rites and spiritual practices.

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No surprise then that the list of conference sponsors and affiliates included Buddhist groups, Humanists, the Progressive Muslim Union, the Shambala Sun, Jewish organizations, New Dimensions, the Christian Alliance for Progress, and PACE e Bene. Among a host of others.

Unlike the Rightists, these groups are largely independent of any single or official church body. Translation: They are not being either spearheaded or funded by any religious body.

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Nor are they politically defined as either Republican or Democrat. Many, in fact, have given up on both parties and are simply looking for candidates who espouse a moral view of the world that is global in scope and universally just in its intentions.

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They are, therefore, largely lay organized but spiritually inspired. The feeling seems to be that it was ministers, priests and bishops who got us the present Administration. Now time has shown us that elections are too important to be trusted to clerical groups. Anybody's clerical group.

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This time, then, they are determined to bring lay theologians, ethicists, activists and professionals to bear on the moral issues of the time rather than trust the soul of the nation to any such single issue groups again.

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The next election, the thinking is, has to be about all of the commandments, not just one or two of them. Otherwise the globe, as well as the country, may well be in very serious danger from the moral issues to which we are now paying very little attention at all: peace, education, economic devastation of the working class, the ecological destruction of the globe and life issues of all ilk rather than simply a few.

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But there is another strain to the thinking, as well. Republicans, the argument contends, talked religion well during the last election. They highlighted some very important issues -- family values and moral questions, for instance -- which are a concern to everyone, left and right alike. But they did not legislate for them. They legislated for the wealthy and the war machine, instead.

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Democrats, on the other hand, the argument goes, have abandoned the religious voice of the nation, simply do not speak the language at all, and so religious people are abandoning them, as well.

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But isn't there an underlying but unspoken question under such concerns that is at least as important as the issues themselves?

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From where I stand the question is: What is really the most religious thing for a political party to do? In a nation that preserves the people from an established religion in order to guarantee religious freedom for all the people, is it really necessary, even acceptable, at all desirable, for a political party to speak in any one religious voice? Or is its responsibility to present the most universally ethical platform and ideals it can, in behalf of a common, universal good, and let religion speak for itself?

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Maybe, if we went back to doing that, we might all be able to judge which religions are really most religious, most ethical of all, rather than simply which religions, instead of which political party, won the election.

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**Source URL (retrieved on 06/29/2017 - 07:47):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/religion-different-voice-politics-different-tone>