

Am I a Liberal?

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Confessions of an Irenic Iconoclast

by Charles Strohmer

Three times that I know of last year I got caught in the crossfire of America's so-called culture war by three people who must think they know me better than I know myself. They responded to pieces I'd written by labeling me a "liberal" ? end of discussion. Like dragsters braking hard at the end of a quarter mile run, it brought to a standstill any grappling on their part that maybe what I'd written wasn't liberal but just not what they wanted to here.

Fortunately I'm not Jim Wallis, the Sojourners' founder and president. Increasingly since Sojourners launched its "God is not a Republican or a Democrat" campaign last summer, which garnered more than 100,000 signatures from across the religious spectrum, being in the crossfire has become a way of life for Wallis. His recent book, *God's Politics*, challenges both the left and the right, politically and religiously, even though it comes across as a leftward lean on many policy proposals.

His itinerary has been carrying him around the country on book signings "disguised," he says, "as town meetings." Every week find this self-described Christian "progressive" in earnest discussions with disparate religious groups and political think tanks, not to mention the occasional sit-down with leaders at the highest levels of government, e.g., George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Hillary Clinton. The latter two, he told me recently during a phone conversation, were two of the latest. But, he quickly added, he catches flack from both sides of the political and theological divide. "But poverty," Wallis replied, "Is a biblical issue. It's not a left issue."

On a recent conservative Christian radio program out of Los Angeles, he was labeled as a leader of the religious left because he cares about poverty. "But poverty," Wallis replied, "Is a biblical issue. It's not a left issue. There are three-thousand verses in the Bible about poverty. The first words out of Jesus, after he came into Nazareth [from the wilderness], were that the Spirit had anointed him to bring good news to the poor."

It can get quite heated, Wallis said, recalling a speech he gave to a group of liberal Democrats. "I gave them a lot of Bible, Jesus, and faith, and a lot of them liked it. They're tired of this secular fundamentalism on the left. But then Kim Gandy, the leader of the National Organization of Women, stood up and just attacked me, saying: We don't want any kind of religion to shape our politics. And then she said: Abortion is our issue. Jim Wallis will sell us out on this issue. He wants to put out a sign that says No Jews or Gays Need Apply, Just White Aryan Christian Men. I mean, I was there," Wallis said. "I heard this."

Wallis believes that Gandy's unfounded response was triggered by how receptive the crowd had been to a Christian message on poverty and the war about Iraq. "That was threatening to her. But two weeks before I was at the Heritage Foundation, on the right, and [someone] there did the same thing. He distorted what I was saying and attacked me. He said: Jim just thinks that the only answer to poverty is more federal spending. But I've written whole chapters that say the opposite to that. Then he said: Jim and his liberal friends think that we deserved bin Laden. But in my book I'm very critical of the left for not being tough enough on terrorists like bin Laden." labels function as convenient ploys for intellectual mis-engagement or disengagement with important issues

These are classic examples of the all too common way in which labels function as convenient ploys for intellectual mis-engagement or disengagement with important issues. They represent the widespread one-upmanship within America that militates against the civil and wise discourse across religious and political lines that should be occurring in order to reach consensus on crucial issues.

For instance, "liberal" on the lips of some conservative Christians, if it is not labeling a political enemy, has become a term of contempt. Is this grace-speech seasoned with salt? Here's my hunch about how this mocking spirit got into Christian attitudes. First it worked its way into the broadcast studios within the vast and hugely popular network of politically conservative Talk Radio programs in America, which millions of conservative Christians listen to every day almost as if Jesus himself were behind the microphone. This mocking spirit then entered political left radio and blogs. Christians of every sort need to ask: is this attitude

consistent with the gospel?

And what is meant by "liberal"? My three responders did not say. A lot of confusion exists about this word. Its use as an adjective before the word "theology," for instance, is dissimilar to its appearance before "democracy." That is, certain features (to be brief and general about it) surrounding the authority of Scripture and religious experience, the nature of revelation and miracles, and the purpose of the church are known as liberal theology to mark them off from how conservative theology handles those issues. "Liberal democracy" is quite another thing, and that, it should immediately be noted, is not a reference to the "liberal" wing of the Democratic party.

Representative government, constitutional law and rights, the balance of powers, individual freedoms, strong political parties, a free press, a free market economy, private associations, churches not controlled by the state..., for Americans who can answer, "Of course! Of Course! We wouldn't want to be without these!", then that is a rousing affirmation of America as a liberal democracy, applauded by both liberals who are Democrats and conservatives who are Republicans.

The word "liberal" to describe a democracy is significant. For not all democracies are liberal. Democracies hold elections, but its leaders may ignore the constitutional limits on their power and deprive citizens of basic rights. These are what Fareed Zakaria calls "illiberal democracies." (Anyone wishing to understand the difference liberal and illiberal democracies would be well-informed by reading Zakaria's *The Future of Freedom*.)

So there seems to be a great deal, indeed, that is "liberal" that conservatives themselves would not only rue the loss of but also be willing to die for, and have died for on many battlefields. Further, where the freedoms and limits of liberal democracy are lacking in any democracy, or not adhered to, voting citizens could produce theocracies, which is what some political scientists fear may occur in countries where radical Islamists gain a political majority. If we cannot explain to ourselves why a liberal order of rights is worth preserving, it will not be possible for us to persuade ourselves and our children to retain it much longer.

Here it is worth pausing to note the words of David Walsh, a professor of politics at the Catholic University of America, commenting on just one characteristic of the liberal democratic tradition, "rights." Walsh writes: "If we cannot explain to ourselves why a liberal order of rights is worth preserving, it will not be possible for us to persuade ourselves and our children to retain it much longer" (from his essay in Eerdman's *Public Morality, Civic Virtue and the Problem of Modern Liberalism*).

One of my gripes with the political and religious scene in America and the media is that left-right polemics have inflated the terms "liberal" and "conservative" far beyond their appreciative usages. They now serve as all-encompassing dismissal words, terms justifying turning a deaf ear to the other. I will concede, however, that when the sides are debating each other the parties may know the line of reasoning each is using and in that sense not need to listen.

But that is not what I'm on about, here. My caution is toward a worldview in which just because someone saying something different, we immediately assume the person must be a liberal or a conservative, and because of that assumption slam on the brakes of our thinking.

As for my three responders, perhaps each heard certain points being made in what I had written and assumed "liberal," which immediately red-flagged me in their minds: they decided that they now knew where I was coming from, and to reject it without further consideration. As a friend said, "We're seeing a return of the old shibboleth mentality. If you have good relations with the wrong tribe you will be cut down at the bridge." I would add: if they even think you do.

This attitude is costing America, big time ? politically, religiously, socially, internationally. Fortunately, many Christians are wising up, and they are finding large audiences hungry for a difference. There's Wallis's considerable influence. Another is Bruce McLaren, a senior leader in the so-called emerging church movement, who for years has been stimulating Christians to think with a fresh orthodoxy that can affirm points of view across a wide spectrum of religious and political thought. His book *A Generous Orthodoxy* has gained widespread appeal. an attempt to carve out a third-way approach on important issues

Significant others have been taking notice, and some seem to be admiring what's taking place. Wallis has been on two of American's top secular interview programs, NPR radio's "Fresh Air" and PBS-TV's "Charlie Rose." On both, as the interviews progressed, each host seemed to get honestly interested in what Wallis was saying precisely because it was a well-thought-out rationale that wasn't polemical, but an attempt to carve out a third-way approach on important issues. What seemed to fascinate both hosts was that here was a Christian way of reasoning that could sensibly critique both sides of the aisle.

Respected New York Times op-ed columnist David Brooks is another. He has identified a number of key Christians who are "trying to step out of the culture war so that they can accomplish more." Last year, Brooks, who's Jewish, chastised heavyweight media giants as being a source for distorting American Evangelical Christianity. "There is a world of difference," Brooks wrote in his column, "between real- life people of faith and the made-for-TV, Elmer Gantry-style blowhards who are selected to represent them.... Meanwhile people like John Stott, who are actually important, get ignored.... If evangelicals could elect a pope, Stott is the person they would likely choose." He then spent the rest of that November 30 column praising Stott and commending him as a "humble," "self- critical," and "embracing" Evangelical who ought to be a go-to person for the media and for politicians, especially Democrats, who really want to understand that faith, as opposed to, he concluded, a Jerry Falwell.

In his May 26 column of this year, he argued that liberals and conservatives should join forces in fighting, for instance, a war on poverty instead of a culture war. Indeed, he already sees them working together. He cited Bono, "a serious if nonsectarian Christian," who is "at the nexus of a vast alliance between socially conservative evangelicals and socially liberal N.G.O.'s.... I see [the evangelical community] in the midst of a transformation ? branching out beyond traditional issues of abortion and gay marriages, and getting more involved in programs to help the needy. I see Rick Warren, who through his new Peace initiative is sending thousands of people to Rwanda and other African nations to fight poverty and disease. I see Chuck Colson deeply involved in Sudan.... Most of all, I see a new sort of evangelical leader emerging." It is leaders like these, he concludes, who will provide new ways and opportunities for "millions of evangelicals" who are "embarrassed by the people held up by the news media as their spokesmen." "The world is suddenly crowded with people like Rick Warren and Bono who are trying to step out of the logic of the culture war

But the thoughtful Brooks is not naive. He recognizes that serious differences over life issues are not going to go away. Nevertheless, "more liberals and evangelicals are realizing that you don't have to convert people; sometimes you can just work with them. The world is suddenly crowded with people like Rick Warren and Bono who are trying to step out of the logic of the culture war so that they can accomplish more in the poverty war."

I don't know what fresh, fleshed-out gospel-shaped influences upon policies for our domestic ills and international relations would look like; but I'm trying to get there. And I'm discovering that it takes concerted experimentation and a willingness to be misunderstood. I can also say that the journey began once I was willing to put the brakes on my own ideologically entrenched way of thinking and try to find a wisdom-based way of reasoning that was gospel-shaped.

The path has been painful because I'm increasingly unable to sign off on much of what political and religious conservatism and liberalism have on offer in this country. The contributions each has made to historical and contemporary America are many and varied, and who knows what their futures will hold out to the nation. Meantime, our changed, post-9/11 world presents us with landscapes of domestic and international sharp curves and turning points that I don't see conservatism or liberalism very able to negotiate. If that puts these isms near their "sell by" date, then let today's buyers beware.

What is it going to take for us to achieve prophetic leadership today? I'll close with some insightful words from Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing about "the prophetic canon" of long-ago, in his book *The Creative Word*:

"The prophets appear when the old consensus is at the brink of failure. They assert that the old structures of human reason and human management are obsolete because of the new things wrought by God.... [The prophets] did not accept the presumptive world of the dominant culture. They refused to have their knowledge or perception or imagination limited or controlled by such social constraints.... The imaginations of the prophets left them open to experiences, discernments, and disruptions that were denied in principle by convention.... [Their task is to] create a new arena for Israel's imagination and derivatively for Israel's political actions. They seek to form an alternative context for humanness by creating a different presumptive world which is bouyed by

different promises, served by different resources, sobered by different threats, and which permits different decisions. That is the visible result of the liberated imagination which goes public in Israel....

"It [therefore] becomes clear that the intent of the prophetic canon is essentially to disrupt the old consensus. The community had probed, shaped and stabilized the precarious disclosure from the tradition. Over a period of time even the radical revelation [at Sinai] of the tradition became fixed and settled and administered. It became stable enough that any adult knew the right answer to the question of a child. There is a quality of 'you have heard it said of old.' The problem is that what was said of old had become settled formula to define and legitimate a closed, settled world. So the Torah, taken by itself, had its radicality domesticated. Therefore there was need for an explosive, disruptive, 'But I say unto you' that both derived from and moved against the old tradition."

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