

At the Left Hand of God

From same-sex marriage to Mel Gibson's gory take on the Crucifixion, the new wedge issue is religiosity, not to be confused with faith

By Anna Quindlen

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March 8 issue - Recently, a man who was enraged by my column sent an e-mail with an exultant sign-off line. He said that in closing he was not only going to mention God, he was going to capitalize the G because he knew it made liberals like me crazy.

Five of the seven sacraments (they won't give me holy orders, and I'm not ready for last rites), 10 years with the nuns, a church wedding, three baptized babies, endless fights as they grew over why they had to go to mass on Sunday and a fair amount of prayer, and it's all wiped out in a single assumption about the nexus between left-leaning politics and atheism. A widespread assumption, too, and one that has come to color, even poison, American political discourse. It was inevitable that the opposite of the religious right would become the irreligious left. It just doesn't happen to be accurate.

When did it first become gospel that only conservatives knew God? It sure wasn't true 40 years ago for a Roman Catholic kid in a Catholic neighborhood, when the knock on John F. Kennedy was that religion was likely to be too much a part of his politics and he'd be on the phone to the Holy See so often, the pope would be a de facto cabinet member. Jimmy Carter's faith was as much a part of his persona as that Chiclets smile, and I'd like to meet the guy who could go head to head with Mario Cuomo on theology and not cry for mercy by the end of the exercise.

All that made perfect sense to me because I had long ago concluded that I had become a liberal largely through religion. Loving your neighbor as yourself, giving your cloak to the man who had none, blessed are the peacemakers: taken together, all of it seemed a clarion call to social justice and the obligation of individuals and institutions to help those who needed help. Jesus was the first radical rabble-rouser I'd ever read about in school, and the best.

Yet the other night I listened to Bill O'Reilly speak of "secularists" on Fox News, and as I tried to parse out who those secularists might be, I discovered to my surprise that they would be me. From same-sex marriage to Mel Gibson's gory cinematic take on the Crucifixion, the new wedge issue is religiosity, not to be confused with faith. This was fomented by the widely ballyhooed "worship gap" of the 2000 presidential election. The poll results seemed decisive, even damning: if you went to church more than once a week, you were likely to support President George Bush by a 2-1 margin. If you never went, you supported Al Gore in the same proportions. "Capital G" and "small g" voters: there was the divide, as clear—and perhaps along the same lines—as the one between heaven and hell.

The problem with that easy equation is that like so much else in American politics, it worked the margins and muted the majority. Most voters neither go to church several times a week nor never set foot in one. American life takes place somewhere in the middle, and there the worship gap narrowed, if not downright disappeared. In fact, those who described themselves as churchgoers "a few times a month" were more likely to support the liberal Democrat than the conservative Republican.

But once the dichotomy at the far margins was combined with the positions we liberals hold on certain social issues, especially those related to the separation of church and state, what emerged was the knee-jerk assumption that those with left leanings were never people of faith. This was also complicated by the fact that many of us not only lack a simplistic way to talk about the subject but also resent even being asked to do it, to slap the contents of our soul down to establish the bona fides of our political positions. Those positions are the product of the ability humans have been given to reason, to interpret and to understand, not some literal textual interpretation that makes dialogue or disagreement unnecessary or subversive. It is astonishing to me to hear preachers of various stripes take to the television pulpit and take positions based on their direct line to the Lord with none of the empathy, humility or compassion Christ modeled in the New Testament. That is not my faith. I like this verse from Hebrews: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Even saying that much makes me uneasy. Democratic politicians have had this problem, and the new conventional wisdom is that to overcome it they need to be doing a lot more public God talk. Forget that. Any time I hear a guy going on and on about how his road to the statehouse or the White House was paved with prayer (not to mention a good bit of soft money), I get the uncomfortable feeling he's doing what Mel Gibson has done with his movie: trading on God for personal gain. The modern version of 30 pieces of silver.

The connection between politics and religion for me lies in the motto of Cornelia Connelly, the Philadelphia wife and mother who founded the order of nuns by whom I was lucky enough to be educated. Actions, not words. Touch the sick, the poor, the children, the powerless, as Christ did, and never mind quoting Leviticus. For the record, I have never written the name of God without capitalizing the G. But that is the letter. What truly matters is the spirit.