

## The baptism of a president

Joan Chittister | Jun. 7, 2007 From Where I Stand

Frankly, I thought the questions not only completely missed the mark, they trivialized the very subject they purported to talk about.

"How do you pray?" they asked Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards on national TV. "What's the biggest sin you've ever committed?" the interviewer wanted to know. "Do you believe in evolution?" she asked, "And if so are the churches that believe in it wrong?" she prodded. "What got you through marital infidelity?" she went on. "Is this a Christian nation?" she asked while millions of people listened for right answers with bated breath.

It was not a local faith sharing group we were watching. It was part of the televised process of electing a president in the United States of America.

So where were the rest of the questions? Like: Do you sleep at night knowing that the longer you do nothing about ending the war in Iraq that more people will die? Or, does it bother your conscience that the more money we spend on war, the more children in this country will go without food or education or medicine? Or, do you ever pray that we'll start spending money on child care so women won't feel a need to have an abortion? Or, do you ever ask God to forgive you for supporting torture in the name of security?

Religion, indeed, has become the flavor of the day. The religion of Democrats, at least, since Republican candidates were woefully missing from moral scrutiny. To be elected president these days, not only must Democratic candidates be able to promise that their religions guide their personal lives but they must be able to prove that they will work hard to see that their religious beliefs determine how they deal with everybody else's religion, as well.

Analyzing the question of faith in the life of presidential candidates after the televised debate, Ralph Reed, past chair of the Christian Coalition, made the point: quoting scripture is not enough. Democrats, he inferred, aren't really sincere about religion. "Liberal Democrats," he insisted, with their commitment to reversing tax cuts, to universal health care and to "cut-and-run policies in Iraq," cannot be accepted in the polling booth by Evangelical voters for whom "action speaks louder than words."

The idea was that moral actions, not spiritual talk, is what really counts.

The question is: What moral actions?

The behaviors that matter, it seems, have more to do with personal positions on personal moral issues -- homosexuality, stem cell research, same-sex marriage and abortion -- than actions having to do with the moral dimensions of the public behavior of the nation.

And Ralph Reed may well be correct. Polls tell us that the more frequently people go to church, the more conservative they are on social issues. For those people, apparently, private morality outweighs the social responsibilities emphasized in scripture and demonstrated by Jesus over and over again.

Republican candidates generally have run on issues of private morality. On the other hand, Democrats have built their platforms more on social issues.

Frequently, therefore, the religious character of Democratic candidates is suspect while the religious character of Republican candidates seems to go without question.

As a result, the issue of what constitutes the kind of religious commitment that is equal to the political questions of the time becomes paramount.

If the questions we are asking our presidential candidates are any sign of what we think religion is all about, Jesus would not do well in these elections.

The woman taken in adultery -- the woman about to be stoned for sexual behavior forbidden by the law -- Jesus dismisses with a wave of the hand and an exhortation.

But the cripple -- in a world where sickness is seen as punishment for sin -- Jesus cures. The marginalized woman -- in a world where women were invisible and discrimination was rank -- Jesus raises from the dead. The outcast leper -- in a world that shunned the wounded -- Jesus touches. In a world where Sabbath laws superseded individual discomfort, Jesus feeds the disciples by gleaning on the Sabbath.

"The blind see, the deaf hear, the poor have the Good News preached to them," he gives as a sign of the coming of the Kingdom. In a world where such as these are not only social outcasts but considered morally unclean as well, he takes responsibility for the marginalized of the society. No questions asked; no punishments imposed; no exceptions made.

He does not demean them. He does not deny them entry into the social order. He does not criminalize them. He does not call them sinners.

Which gets us to the irony of it all.

What kind of a society does each of these presently contrary moral definitions produce? Which is really the most religious? Whose religious values should really be in question: those who preach the Gospel of power and wealth for the wealthy and powerful or those who proclaim the rights of the poor, both here and everywhere else, in a society where wealth is worshipped?

We're beginning to see it happen.

An otherwise little touted but surprising bit of information gives us a clue to the answer to that question in contemporary USA.

According to the Global Peace Index released by *The Economist* magazine May 29, the United State is among the least peaceful nations in the world. (See [www.visionofhumanity.com](http://www.visionofhumanity.com) [1])

Of the 121 nations evaluated, the United States ranks 96th, between Yemen and Iran. Iraq the report ranks as the least peaceful of all, right after Russia, Israel and Sudan.

This new Global Peace Index, rather than simply measuring the presence or absence of war as an index of harmony and public security, is based on 24 indicators designed to explore what its creators call "the texture of peace."

The study's domestic indicators include "the level of violent crime, the level of respect of civil rights, the number of homicides per 100,000 people, the level of its military expenditures, its ease of access to small arms, its relations with neighboring countries and the level of distrust among citizens."

Using grand words to glorify war, making war and personal morality the measure of the moral fiber of a nation while ignoring the domestic climate, the human needs and the civil rights of the nation itself does not a moral nation make.

There is, it seems, a question about the quality of religion in this country on both sides of the divide.

Those who would lead us in the future may rightly be asked whether or not religious principles will guide their public behavior. But those who are leading us now have questions to answer, too -- which, if the quality of life in the United States for all its citizens and the character of our behavior toward the rest of the world is any measure -- certainly equals, if not far transcends, our concentration on private behavior as a determinant of our public morality.

From where I stand, the model of Jesus is a clear one: A religious life is defined by more than personal moral choices. It demands actions designed to make the world better for everyone. Those who claim to be Christian might want to remember that when they start choosing presidents on the basis of their "Christian principles."

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[1] <http://www.visionofhumanity.com>