

AMERICAN THEOCRACY

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Is God ambidextrous?

YOU cannot get more brazen than holding a political rally in a church. Last week, more than 1,000 religious activists gathered in a splendid old one in Washington, DC, to talk politics. They discussed their spiritual agenda for America, swapped stories about power struggles within their party and travelled to Capitol Hill to lobby congressmen.

But this was not another example of the religious right on the march. A striking number of the men looked as if they were taking part in a beard-growing competition. Many of the women were in shocking pink. The speakers included a wilderness guide-cum-meditation teacher and a shaman who specialises in helping activists to “access spiritual wisdom”. One speaker worked the crowd into a frenzy with rhetorical questions (Does God believe in invading Iraq? Does God believe in cutting taxes for the rich?) before urging them to “hug your neighbour” and “show some love”. The Southern Baptist Convention this was not.

The religious left is more energised than it has been for years. The number of new-wave “values voters”—who loathe, rather than love, the values embraced by George Bush—is growing rapidly. They range from blacks and Latinos (who are among the most churchgoing people in the country) to left-wing evangelicals to a hotch-potch of Buddhists and gurus, and they are coming together to make their voices heard. The religious left has acquired spokesmen in the form of Jim Wallis, the author of “God's Politics”, and Michael Lerner, a rabbi and the organiser of last week's conference. Several topical themes are giving it momentum, from immigration reform, where the Catholic church has been particularly outspoken, to Iraq.

Hence the reappearance of one of those questions that has been bugging Democratic strategists for decades. Can the religious left become a force in American politics comparable to the right-wing version? Religious leftists point out that a growing number of people are disillusioned with the choice between a pious right, which thinks that Jesus cared more about gay marriage than poverty, and a secular left that believes religion has no role in the public square. They also argue that the religious left has a proud history in America, from the Social Gospel wing of the Progressive movement to civil-rights campaigning. The political marriage between religion and the right, they argue, is the exception rather than the rule.

The Democratic high command has at last worked out that it does not have much chance of thriving in one of the most religious countries in the world if it cannot close the “God-gap”. Yet, if anything, the God-gap is growing. In 2004 Mr Bush won 64% of the votes of people who go to church more than once a week and 58% of people who go once a week. The proportion of people who regard the Democratic Party as less “friendly” towards religion than the Republican increased from 12% in 2003 to 20% in 2005. Fully 67% of people think that liberals have gone too far in keeping religion out of schools.

The growing God-gap has set off a flurry of activity in Democratic circles. Two of the most left-wing members of the leadership—Nancy Pelosi and Howard Dean—have courted “values voters”, Ms Pelosi by visiting Lakewood mega-church in Houston and Mr Dean by appearing on Pat Robertson's “700 Club”. The Democrats have fielded a pro-life candidate, Bob Casey, to take on Rick Santorum in the Pennsylvania Senate race. Both Hillary Clinton and Edward Kennedy have gone out of their way to argue that abortion is a tragedy as well as a right. Messrs Wallis and Lerner have become familiar figures on Capitol Hill.

But is this truly a sea-change in American religious politics? Or is it a brief “hallelujah moment”—born of Bush fatigue and political opportunism—that will bring no lasting change? The betting is on the latter. The religious left suffers from two long-term problems. The first is that it is building its house on sand. The groups that make up the heart of the religious left—mainline Protestants, liberal Catholics and reform Jews—are all experiencing long-term decline. Most of the growth in American religion is occurring among conservative churches. And the constituent parts of the religious left are also at odds over important issues. Middle-of-the-road Catholics are happy to march hand-in-hand with mainline Protestants over immigration and inequality. But they often disagree over abortion and gay rights.

The secular left usually wins

Serious doubts also persist about how much the Democratic Party is willing to change to embrace religion. Some influential Democrats want real change. Others think that all they need to do is drop a few platitudes to religious voters and the God-gap will disappear. Mr Dean's performance on Pat Robertson's television programme was as telling as it was laughable. He not only chose to talk to a man who plays a much bigger role in the liberal imagination than among evangelicals; he also let slip that Democrats “have an enormous amount in common with the Christian community.”

The biggest problem for the religious left is that it is badly outgunned by the secular left. The Democratic Party's elites—from interest-groups to funders to activists—are determinedly secular. So are many of its most loyal voters. John Kerry won 62% of the vote of people who never go to church; and that group is the fastest-growing single “religious” group in the country. These secular voters don't just feel indifferent to religion. They are positively hostile to it, regarding it as an embodiment of irrationality and a threat to liberal values such as the right to choose. These crusading secularists are in a particularly militant mood at the moment, as the sales of Kevin Phillips's Bush-bashing book, “American Theocracy”, testify. The last thing they want is a religious left to counterbalance the religious right.