

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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RELIGIOUS BATTLES COULD MAKE THE 'CULTURAL WAR' LONGER AND NASTIER

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American history is marked by periods of heightened cultural, social and political turmoil. Such periods, which can radically alter the economic landscape, are to be expected in a pluralistic, democratic society. They are usually sparked by a generational leadership change, the end of a war, a significant demographic shift, or a combination of such factors.

So it is natural and predictable that the end of the cold war, a huge surge in immigration, and the coming of political age of the baby boomers (the largest demographic cohort ever spawned in the United States) would produce the whopper of a "cultural war" that is, in my opinion, just beginning in earnest in this country.

A complicating factor this time around is that it looks increasingly as though more and more of the battles in this cultural war will be fought on religious grounds. This is a relatively new development in our history. It is also disturbing, since fights that involve religious beliefs are usually much more damaging to the nation's social fabric than economic ones; and the turmoil can last much longer, since compromise is more difficult in such disputes.

For the most part, past periods of cultural turmoil in the United States have largely centered around economic matters, since religious homogeneity has been a hallmark of this nation. But there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that unprecedented religious turbulence lies ahead. One can see it in the on-going, heated battles over abortion, gay rights, public school curriculum, condom distribution programs and parental choice in education.

But the truly interesting thing is that religious arguments are increasingly cropping up in political debates over what have in the past been generally regarded as secular issues. These fights tend to center around the question of whether certain government actions or inactions are "moral," and they involve issues affecting tax, health, welfare, housing and even trade policy.

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The Clintons are not the originators of this trend. They are harbingers, historical stage setters. Their rhetoric provides insights into the characteristics of the societal battles that lie ahead in much the same way that the populist oratory of Andrew Jackson in 1828 and Lyndon Johnson in the early 1960s offered signals as to the nature of coming social turbulence.

In short, the emphasis the Clintons place on their religious beliefs as justification for their social activism, their public insistence that the political right has no lock on religious argument, and their mixing of Christian theology with the secular humanistic rhetoric of the liberal left establishment is suggestive of a new kind of debate in the political arena.

In the June/July issue of "First Things," a "Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life," Richard John Neuhaus, argues that the religious left's influence on the nation's political, social and economic affairs is for the most part inconsequential today.

He notes that this hasn't always been the case, pointing out that religious activism played an important part in providing moral legitimation for the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. One thinks, he says, of groups such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, and about the Berrigan brothers, William Sloane Coffin, and, in a category by himself, Martin Luther King, Jr.

But today, he says, the secular left "no longer needs" the religious left. The "advocacy of the oldline church-and-society curia (among, for example, Presbyterians USA, United Methodists, Episcopalians, and ELCA Lutherans) is not readily distinguishable from the positions advanced by, say, the editorial board of the *New York Times* or from the conventional wisdom in the faculty lounges of the nation's colleges and universities." Therefore, there is "no felt need for its moral legitimation," he says.

"The religious left is still very much there," Neuhaus adds. But, he says, that with two exceptions, "it does not threaten and it does not offer anything that the cultural elites view as substantively or strategically valuable." These exceptions are the gay movement, which Neuhaus says seeks "moral legitimation from the religious left in the form of ordaining active gays and blessing same sex unions," and the abortion rights movement, for which "some liberal churches still provide moral cover."

In my opinion, this is about to change. Bill and Hillary are superb politicians, and they clearly sense a need for a new moral cover for the programs of the left. The driving force is not solely the rapid growth in political influence of the conservative, religious right. It is more complicated than that. It involves two related factors that raise serious questions about the validity of the historic assumptions on which the American Democratic Party had planned its future.

- o The first is the general discrediting of socialism worldwide, which has robbed the left of an important quasi-religious foundation for its beliefs.

- o The second is an unquestionable resurgence of the influence of religion within the United States.

Or, as Neuhaus points out in the above mentioned article, "the assumed link between modernity and secularization did not hold. History is not turning out the way we were educated to think it would. Religion is back, and in a very big way."

I intend to write more about this in future articles. For the time being, suffice it to say that I expect that future Democratic candidates will find it necessary to advertise their religious beliefs, to speak openly of their faith, as Bill and Hillary do; and like the Clintons, be willing and able to argue their political causes in religious terms.

A year ago, a story in the *Washington Post* pointed out that for many years it had been considered bad form among liberals to mention God or virtue or morality, "or anything else that might happen way inside anybody." My favorite example of this reluctance among liberal democrats to couch anything in religious terms is the following recent quote by HHS Secretary Donna Shalala: "I don't like to put it in moral terms," she said, "but I do believe that having children out of wedlock is just wrong." What other terms are there for such a statement, Donna?

The *Post* noted that Hillary intends to change this attitude among her colleagues on the left that religious language is anathema. She will not relinquish the religious argument to the right, the *Post* said. "The search for meaning should cut across all kinds of religious and ideological boundaries. That's what we should be struggling with--not whether you have a corner on God."

A subsequent article in the *Sunday New York Times Magazine*, entitled "St. Hillary," noted that Hillary "recognizes that issues of public values and personal behavior are coming to dominate the politics of this millennial age--but that so far those issues have been mostly defined and championed by conservative Republicans [and] she is moved by the impatient conviction that moderates and liberals have wanly surrendered the adjective 'religious' to the right."

The problem is that liberal theology is vastly different from that of the religious right. The *New York Times* piece, for example, describes Hillary's "politics of virtue" as being "derived from religiosity." But it adds that the exact nature of her religious beliefs are "hard to discern under the gauzy and gushy wrappings of New Age jargon that blanket it." Her politics, it continues, appear to "combine a generally 'progressive' social agenda with a strong dose of moralism, the admixture of the two driven by an abundant faith in the capacity of the human intellect and the redeeming power of love."

It quotes her as saying that the Golden Rule "is a tenet of people who believe in humanistic principles," and that it should lead people to "band together as adults" to solve such societal problems as inner city decay, crime, drug addiction and violence.

J. Budziszewski, who teaches in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin, describes it all this way. "Compassion is the virtue to which [Hillary] refers and while in ordinary life it means that A gives of his own to help B, in Mrs. Clinton's style of activism it means that A takes from C to make B dependent. Apparently, what the 'politics of virtue' means to the author is a high-tax welfare state."

With Bill too, the spiritual and the secular have intertwined in a sort of odd, non-traditional mish-mash. The December 13, 1993 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, for example, reports that

Clinton had the following line from one of his own speeches (but hardly from scripture), framed and hung on the wall of his Little Rock office. "The only way you can save your soul is with public service."

Perhaps the most representative statement made by either Clinton highlighting the divergence of their religious views from traditional Christian teaching was contained in Clinton's "New Covenant" campaign speech, in which he used the phrase "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has imagined what we can build." The original (1 Corinthians 2:9, quoting Isaiah 64:4), of course, refers to what God can build, not to the constructive powers of Bill and his followers.

In closing, I'd like to note that in the past, the left has had no qualms about charging members of the religious right with being "nuts," "fanatics," "kooks" and "cranks," and openly questioning both the sincerity and theological accuracy of their beliefs. By seldom advancing a religious argument for their political positions, the left has enjoyed the benefit of not having their beliefs challenged in a political context, at least in the public square. As I said earlier, this will be different in the future, and virtually assures that the ongoing cultural war will be longer and less predictable.

I am generally optimistic, but the following words from Neuhaus, a brilliant theologian and thinker, are troubling and reveal, I think, the importance of keeping an eye on this issue. "There is a necessary and unavoidable interaction between politics and religion," Neuhaus notes. But trouble begins, he says, when "religion degenerates into ideology" and becomes "a set of ideas in the service of political power." This "conflation of politics and religion is the death of authentic politics and the death of authentic religion." I guess we'll see.

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