

Failing America's Faithful

A Conversation with Kathleen Kennedy Townsend,
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- Q: You wrote in your book *Failing America's Faithful* that the religious right has "reduced God to a few divisive political issues" and lost the greater message of the Gospel, namely love of God and love of neighbor. Are there certain political issues in which people of faith, and thus faith-based organizations, must engage? Are there certain political issues they should avoid? If the question is about squeezing God into certain political categories, are there some of those categories that should be avoided in politics by people of faith?
- A: Actually, people of faith can deal with all issues – across the board. The question is where do we put your emphasis, which issues do we tend to emphasize? There are some issues that really do rise to the top.

I think this issue of torture is just been horrendous, and I think that people of faith should speak loudly and clearly against torture. First, torture is a violation of our laws. It is a violation of the Geneva Convention. It's a violation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. So if we see ourselves as a moral leader how can we not condemn torture? Second, studies have shown that torture does not in fact work. People lie when they're being tortured. Three, even if some people don't lie, as we keep saying over and over again, we love the saints because they were tortured and resisted torture, and now we torture our enemies. We are not being true to our own moral traditions. Christ, to whom we pray, was tortured. We think that was wrong. Why would we ever say that this is a model for our actions?

Finally, we've seen all the mistakes that have been made with the death penalty. How do we know that we're not even attacking the wrong people? That's a minor argument. The more important one is dignity. What we're trying to do in the world is to show ourselves as a people, that we as a people value morality and justice and dedication to law. Engaging in torture undercuts all of that.

Member of the Christian Right and a number of bishops, however, have decided that they would like to focus primarily on abortion and in doing so, they often find themselves condemning Democrats. Most interesting, however, is that when Democrats are in power the number of abortions are reduced. Why? Because Democrats create a social safety net which means that is easier for a parent to raise the child – health care, job training, child care, food stamps. Democrats also

believe in providing contraceptives, which means that it is easier to avoid unwanted pregnancies. So, it is ironic that many of those who say they are concerned about abortion, actually support candidates – that is Republicans – who although they decry abortions don't enact the policies that would actually reduce them.

The question then is what do those loud voices from both the Christian right and the Catholic bishops really care about. They seem to be more interested in rhetoric than results, and I challenge them on that.

I think Catholic Bishops have a particular obstacle to overcome as far as their credibility on abortion is concerned. In an all male hierarchy, why do they choose the one sin that only women can commit? And, where were these voices of outrage during the pederasty scandal – when it is so clear that children have been harmed.

Q: Many of the positions that you're advocating diverge from the official teachings of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church – or at least they reemphasize and reorder the priorities of the Magisterium. How do you reconcile what you have called your “two baptisms,” as a Catholic and as a Democrat, when they appear to conflict?

A: The Church is a human institution. It makes mistakes and it changes. At one point priests could marry, then they couldn't. At one point, usury was wrong, and then it wasn't. At one point, women were considered “the devil's gateway” and “misbegotten males,” and the Pope has apologized for that teaching. Until the 1960s, women could not get a doctorate in theology at Catholic institutions, and now they can. It took the Church 350 years to apologize to Galileo. In the 1950s, John Courtney Murray was silenced by the church and in 1965, he authored the Vatican paper on freedom of religion. So the Church changes its mind, and it's up to us in the Church to help it change its mind.

Q: Churches have historically been at the forefront of social change and reform in this country from abolitionism to women's suffrage, on civil rights, etc., and yet, you argue in your book that churches have become obsessed today with a few private issues, rather than a broader social agenda. Do you find any particular point at which the religious social movements have turned the corner or changed an issue and how does that turn back around?

A: Absolutely. You know, it's an excellent question. I wrote my book because I have seen that while religious movements may start with a narrow agenda, it can change. The spirit works in mysterious and wonderful ways. Abolitionism grew out of the Second Great Awakening, which was not originally focused on freedom for slaves. There were these extraordinary revivals where women and black preachers were touched by the spirit and preached to appreciative audiences made up men and women, black and whites. It is hard for us to imagine that this took place before the civil war, but it did. When the Spirit is unleashed, it creates enormous opportunities that can hardly be imagined. The Spirit took people from feeling that God was in

them, to knowing it was in the hearts of slaves. The religious revival happens first and then the larger social agenda.

The phenomenon is happening today. For a period, people of faith focused on three issues of abortion, gay marriage and stem cell research, but now the people in the pews are demanding a larger agenda. Evangelical preachers are saying, 'We also have to care about poverty. We have to care about AIDS, war and peace, torture.'

Q: You spoke today at lunch about the resurgence of the religious left. How do you see that playing out in the future? Is the so-called religious right as a political movement doomed, or simply in jeopardy, in a crisis?

A: Well, I think the religious left is finally finding its voice, and I think it has been silenced and it silenced itself, really for the last 30 years. There are obviously some exceptions. On the whole it has not been loud, and now it is growing in force in ways that I think are very, very exciting. And you can see it in the efforts of Jim Wallace, which are expanding.

And you can also see it in the fact that the Democratic candidates are now much more comfortable talking about their faith than their previous ones: certainly Hillary Clinton and her Methodism, also Barak Obama, John Edwards, Chris Dodd, Joe Biden. Each of them is much more comfortable than our previous candidates have been. I think it has been a plus for people of faith in the pews to understand that they can take their belief and think about not only the spiritual comfort that comes from being a believer, but the spiritual discomfort that asks us to do more.

Q: If abortion has been a rallying point for the religious right, is there a single rallying point for the religious left, or is that movement more fractured or diverse?

A: The left has a broad agenda. First, it condemns torture. It has organized marches, rallies and letter writing campaign against the war. Traditionally it has also and it focused on poverty – including hunger and health and immigration. Like many throughout the world, it is concerned with the environment, global warming, access to clean water, clean air and the preservation of the wildness it.

Q: Do you see any of our future or current presidential candidates being able to provide the kind of leadership you call for in your book?

A: Yes. I think Hilary Clinton speaks eloquently about her own faith, and I think is dedicated to obviously to bringing health care to all our citizens and to bringing our troops out of Iraq, and to building a greater sense of community. After all, she wrote the book *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*, which is very much part of the Catholic social teaching tradition. All these immigrants who came here knew that they were not going to be able to raise their family alone. They were working very hard. They needed neighbors that they could trust and they needed the help that the church or the schools or the hospitals that were built by the Catholic immigrants

provided. This is very much part of the understanding that we are not here alone, even our family is not here alone. You need the greater social network.

Q: Could you say a bit about your critique of individualism and call for a focus on community and the common good?

A: Yes. There are two strains in American life: the individualistic strain and the communitarian. There is something very appealing about individualism. It has, after all, brought the hardworking from all over the world to build their own life and the life of our country. This has been the enormous freedom to dream about creating one's own life, to put away the constraint of the old, the judgments of the past and to envision the new.

I applaud what it has accomplished, but there is, as you know, a darker side to that glory. The entrepreneur may give jobs, but those jobs may also pollute the river. You can have freedom of religion, and freedom of the press, but you also have pornography. So you need a balance to that strong individualism with one that asks us not just what is good for ourselves but what is good for community. It is after all – I believe – a community that allows for the individual to flourish. An individual is going to flourish much more when they don't have to worry if they can walk outside, they can go to good schools, they can get a good health care, they can breathe the air, drink the water and enjoy the parks. Really for any individual to flourish, it requires a strong community and that notion is part of the legacy of the common good, and I think has to be better articulated.