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**Joan Chittister: From Where I Stand
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Is this kind of Christianity Christian?

"The spirit we have, not the work we do, is what makes us important to the people around us."

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By Joan Chittister, OSB

The problem with the political agenda of the Radical Right is not that they're wrong. Who isn't concerned about the so-called "moral values" on which this last presidential election is said to have hinged.

Each of those concerns surely merits attention. Abortion, for instance, is indeed a major issue. Hitler did it and called it eugenics; the Chinese did it in Tibet and called it population control. Obviously, the whole question of the morality of abortion is a serious and an imperative one, as is birth control for some denominations and alcohol for others, for instance. Just as obvious, however, is the question of whether or not the government of a pluralistic state ought to be legislating for any of those things according to the tenets of any one particular religious tradition. Those are questions of faith, not of politics. That's how we got the Taliban in the first place. Someone somewhere decided that their religion had to be everybody's religion.

The question for the state, then, is not whether or not abortion is morally wrong. That is for religions to decide. The question for the state to determine in its responsibility to assure "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is, What is life? When we know that answer, we'll all know, each of us from a different religious perspective, the political answer to abortion.

This is not the first time in U.S. history, however, that politics began to look like religion and single-issue religion tried to drive politics.

It was religion that fostered prohibition on moral grounds and its notoriously ineffective decline into the speakeasies operated by organized crime syndicates.

It was also religion that supported slavery and segregation and the argument that God

made the white man (sic) superior.

It was religion that fueled the fire or provided the basis for many a war or Crusade.

It was religion that inveighed against dissection and all the medical information that came from it.

Religion -- including Christianity--however sincere, has often been proven wrong as time went by.

It may be prudent then, while we insist that it was God's will that we invade Iraq, and that it is murder to engage in stem cell research, that we approach all our questions with political respect for different religious sensitivities everywhere.

I understand the so-called "conservative" agenda. I even share its concerns. They are real and they are important. But they are also incomplete -- which is why I doubt that, as they are being framed right now, that they are either "right" or "religious." The agenda is simply too narrow, too concentrated on issues around human sexuality alone, and too self-centered to be the agenda that drove Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem curing lepers, feeding the hungry and raising the dead to life.

Anyone has the right, of course, to privatize religion and call that "Christianity." But no one has the right in a nation based on the separation of church and state to impose it on everyone else. After all, while some people are getting a patent on their definition of Christianity, the rest of the Christian agenda may well pass us by. If we're going to create a party platform on "Christian" values, we ought to at least ask whose Christianity we are selling -- and how.

There are many Christian churches, for instance, that oppose to abortion on demand but leave room in their moral pantheon for therapeutic abortions. Some religions, in some circumstances, would even require it.

School prayer, one of the icons of the movement, sounds very good in principle. But in a nation now decisively pluralistic, whose population is now more Buddhist, more Hindu, more Muslim, more Jewish than ever before in history -- and each of them getting larger every day -- whose prayers shall it be?

From 1990-2000 devotees of Islam in the United States rose 109 percent, of Buddhism 170 percent, of Hinduism 273 percent and of Christianity 5 percent.

Do Christians of the radical right really want their grandchildren reading from the Koran or the Vedas or the Flower Sutras for morning prayer? And if not, what will those same Christians do when school boards under different ethnic influences require them? Will they declare that minority schools in ethnic areas must use the Christian scriptures to satisfy our definition of God because this nation was settled, founded, incorporated by Christians over 200 years ago?

Obviously, there is a difference between questions of personal faith and questions of public politics.

But politics do touch on the rest of the Christian value system, if not in its speeches, certainly in its budget. Here politics and morals become one, are public, are universal, are not amenable to individual choice.

This month we saw "compassionate conservatism" -- all that concern we're told this government has for moral values and life and Christian identity -- show its real face. Now that the election is over, abortion and school prayer have suddenly disappeared from this administration's agenda, but the release of the Bush White House budget makes the administration's values clear. Furthermore, because the budget impinges on every citizen in this society, the values cannot be dismissed on grounds of personal moral commitment.

National budgets are a nation's theology walking.

In an era in which we call poverty "low-income" and hunger "lack of food security," the number of poor, according to the U.S Census Bureau, is increasing and the number of hungry in the richest country in the world has been rising steadily for four years. To pay for a war we should never have fought -- at least not for the reasons they gave us -- this budget is slashing domestic programs.

The budget of this Christian presidency cuts food stamps. It reduces support for subsidized housing. It suggests pillaging social security. It reduces environmental enforcement programs and scientific research in a scientific age. It even reduces veteran's health benefits.

Clearly, the country is in danger of going the way of all oligarchies; power and wealth are sucked to the top, while those on the bottom bleed. We can call it "Christian" as it collapses.

And all the while, we watch more food lines forming, more homeless on the streets, more environmental degradation and more of the elderly living destitute lives.

More than that, according to the **budget analysis** done by Bread for the World, (www.bread.org) while we honor our tax breaks to the rich in this country, we are not keeping our promise to fight HIV/AIDS around the world or to support the Third World development programs that might really make us secure in the future.

From where I stand, it seems that the poor who will be most affected by these budget cuts have no political voice with which to protest them and the rich can hardly be expected to object since they are benefiting from them

That leaves only the Christians -- the pastors and the bishops and the Religious Right -- who worked so hard to put this administration into office, to require that the rest of the

