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Onward, Moderate Christian Soldiers

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IT would be an oversimplification to say that America's culture wars are now between people of faith and nonbelievers. People of faith are not of one mind, whether on specific issues like stem cell research and government intervention in the case of Terri Schiavo, or the more general issue of how religion relates to politics. In recent years, conservative Christians have presented themselves as representing the one authentic Christian perspective on politics. With due respect for our conservative friends, equally devout Christians come to very different conclusions.

It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach to politics is at least as faithful as that of those who are more conservative. Our difference concerns the extent to which government should, or even can, translate religious beliefs into the laws of the state.

People of faith have the right, and perhaps the obligation, to bring their values to bear in politics. Many conservative Christians approach politics with a certainty that they know God's truth, and that they can advance the kingdom of God through governmental action. So they have developed a political agenda that they believe advances God's kingdom, one that includes efforts to "put God back" into the public square and to pass a constitutional amendment intended to protect marriage from the perceived threat of homosexuality.

Moderate Christians are less certain about when and how our beliefs can be translated into statutory form, not because of a lack of faith in God but because of a healthy acknowledgement of the limitations of human beings. Like conservative Christians, we attend church, read the Bible and say our prayers.

But for us, the only absolute standard of behavior is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Repeatedly in the Gospels, we find that the Love Commandment takes precedence when it conflicts with laws. We struggle to follow that commandment as we face the realities of everyday living, and we do not agree that our responsibility to live as Christians can be codified by legislators.

When, on television, we see a person in a persistent vegetative state, one who will never recover, we believe that allowing the natural and merciful end to her ordeal is more loving than imposing government power to keep her hooked up to a feeding tube.

When we see an opportunity to save our neighbors' lives through stem cell research, we believe that it is our duty to pursue that research, and to oppose legislation that would impede us from doing so.

We think that efforts to haul references of God into the public square, into schools and courthouses, are far more apt to divide Americans than to advance faith.

Following a Lord who reached out in compassion to all human beings, we oppose amending the Constitution in a way that would humiliate homosexuals.

For us, living the Love Commandment may be at odds with efforts to encapsulate Christianity in a political agenda. We strongly support the separation of church and state, both because that principle is essential to holding together a diverse country, and because the policies of the state always fall short of the demands of faith. Aware that even our most passionate ventures into politics are efforts to carry the treasure of religion in the earthen vessel of government, we proceed in a spirit of humility lacking in our conservative colleagues.

In the decade since I left the Senate, American politics has been characterized by two phenomena: the increased activism of the Christian right, especially in the Republican Party, and the collapse of bipartisan collegiality. I do not think it is a stretch to suggest a relationship between the two. To assert that I am on God's side and you are not, that I know God's will and you do not, and that I will use the power of government to advance my understanding of God's kingdom is certain to produce hostility.

By contrast, moderate Christians see ourselves, literally, as moderators. Far from claiming to possess God's truth, we claim only to be imperfect seekers of the truth. We reject the notion that religion should present a series of wedge issues useful at election time for energizing a political base. We believe it is God's work to practice humility, to wear tolerance on our sleeves, to reach out to those with whom we disagree, and to overcome the meanness we see in today's politics.

For us, religion should be inclusive, and it should seek to bridge the differences that separate people. We do not exclude from worship those whose opinions differ from ours. Following a Lord who sat at the table with tax collectors and sinners, we welcome to the Lord's table all who would come. Following a Lord who cited love of God and love of neighbor as encompassing all the commandments, we reject a political agenda that displaces that love. Christians who hold these convictions ought to add their clear voice of moderation to the debate on religion in politics.

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