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Dr. Dean Talks Religion—Or Something Like That

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Dr. Dean has been telling the press and the public that he now intends to talk about his faith. The announcement caught the media off balance as Dean announced that he would now claim a Christian identity and mention Jesus on the campaign trail. As one might expect, there is a good deal more to this story, and it reveals as much about the American political scene as about Howard Dean.

A former governor of Vermont, Dr. Dean first made his announcement in an interview with the Boston Globe. In the interview, Dean described himself as a committed believer in Jesus Christ and said that he would "include references to Jesus and God in his speeches as he stumps in the South." This came as a shock to the newspaper. Reporter Sarah Schweitzer responded with an understatement: "The move is striking for a man who has steadfastly kept his personal life out of the campaign, rarely offering biographical information, much less his religious beliefs." In reality, Gov. Dean's religious convictions are so private, even he doesn't seem to know what they are.

Howard Dean has run as one of the most secular candidates in the history of American presidential politics. In previous statements, Dean has explained that he does not attend church very often and does not allow his faith to inform his public policy. "My religion doesn't inform my public policy," Dean once explained. Dean also told ABC News commentator George Stephanopoulos that his religious convictions have "nothing" to do with his political career.

In a previous statement Dean simply summarized his personal separation of church and state: "My faith doesn't inform my public policy." Like John F. Kennedy, Dean could have argued that his faith doesn't determine his public policy. But Gov. Dean went far further, arguing that his faith doesn't even inform his public policy.

Dean's interview with the Boston Globe came just days after the appearance of a cover story in The New Republic. In "Howard Dean's Religion Problem," writer Franklin Foer described Dean as "one of the most secular candidates to run for president in modern history." The New Republic, a magazine that eagerly endorsed Al Gore for president in 2000, is clearly worried that Howard Dean's secularism makes him virtually unelectable.

The New Republic article cited a 2000 poll undertaken by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press which found that seventy percent of Americans want their president to be a "person of faith." As that poll made clear, this preference is a nation-wide reality and is enough to ensure that no secular candidate can win the South or the Midwest. As Foer concluded, "in the last five presidential elections, the candidate who more aggressively conveyed his religiosity (whether honestly or not so honestly) won." Foer draws the obvious conclusion for the 2004 election: "Seen in this light, a popular contest between Dean's secularism and George W. Bush's heartfelt faith could be, well, no contest. And the same, in turn, could be true of the election."

The New Republic article is an insightful piece of political analysis. Foer recognizes that the Democratic Party and

political liberals bought into secularism and lost their hold on mainstream Christianity. Now, caught in the grip of competing special interest groups, the Democrats are trending secular in a big way.

Dean's personal life is a graphic testimony to this reality. Raised an Episcopalian, Dean stopped attending church at age thirteen when his father, a committed church warden, no longer required him to attend. Later, Dean married a Jewish physician, Judith Steinberg, and the two decided at first to join the Unitarian Church. This would make perfect sense, since the Unitarian Church—virtually devoid of any theological conviction—is the perfect meeting place for a secularized Episcopalian and his secularized Jewish wife. Nevertheless, the Deans decided that they would retain their personal religious identification and later allowed their children to decide whether to be Episcopalian or Jewish. Both chose to claim a Jewish identity.

In Dean's highly secularized world, this pattern of decisions makes perfect sense. Since he has given no indication of personal conviction or theological concern, Dean obviously saw his church membership as a matter of social and cultural significance. This became abundantly clear when Dean later resigned his membership in a local Episcopal church and joined the Congregationalists. This significant shift did not come as a result of theological controversy or spiritual concern. To the contrary, Dean broke with the Episcopal Church because the congregation resisted a bike trail across its property. Obviously, Dean is more comfortable in the High Church of Environmentalism than in any church of deep Christian conviction.

Dean is running to the left of the other major candidates and he often claims to be running for “the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party.” Dean's new denomination, the United Church of Christ, is the vanguard for the theological left—supporting homosexual marriage, homosexual ministers, abortion, and just about every other liberal cause. As a matter of fact, when Gov. Dean went looking for a church to join [after the Great Bike Path crisis], he found himself comfortable in the church that prides itself on being what we might call “the liberal wing of liberal Protestantism.”

Governor Dean attempted to try out his new use of religious language when speaking to an African-American church in Columbia, South Carolina. The Boston Globe reports that Dean changed his tone of voice as well as his message as he told the congregation that “in this house of the Lord, we know that the power rests in God's hands and in Jesus' hands for helping us. But the power also is on this, God's earth—Remember Jesus said, ‘render unto God those things that are God's but unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's.’” If that sounds a bit confusing in terms of religious conviction, Dean's other statements will just add to the problem. He told the Boston reporter that “Christ was someone who sought out people who were disenfranchised, people who were left behind.” He went on to say, “He fought against self-righteousness of people who had everything... He was a person who set an extraordinary example that has lasted 2000 years, which is pretty inspiring when you think about it.” Pretty inspiring when you think about it? That statement is more remarkable for what it doesn't say—when you think about it.

Dean explains that his previous reticence in speaking of his Christian faith is because he holds to “the Northeast tradition,” of privacy. “People in the Northeast don't talk about their religion. It's a very personal private matter, and that's the tradition I was brought up in.” He has also explained that his new-found need to talk about religion is due to his discovery of the exotic territory known as the South. “I'm still learning a lot about faith in the South and how important it is,” he said. Next thing you know, Dr. Dean will be talking about Kudzu and chomping chewing tobacco at the NASCAR track. Southerners are not likely to appreciate Dean's patronizing approach to both their region and religion.

The liberal journal *The American Prospect* went so far as to declare Dean “essentially, a northern evangelist.” The magazine noted that Dean's campaign seems to create a “quasi-religious fervor.” This is, the *Prospect* admitted, rather odd. “He almost never mentions God in his stump speeches and he rarely goes to church himself. Nevertheless, his rhetoric—like his campaign structure—is deeply grounded in the social practices of a branch of radical Protestantism whose tenets still wield power in the structures of Vermont's government.” The magazine went on to suggest that Dean is following in the pathway established by the Pilgrims who “created a society based partly on the anti-authoritarian religious principles of Congregationalism, their religion (and, since the early 80's, Dean's).”

On the other hand, to mention the Pilgrims and Governor Dean in one sentence is to point to more dissimilarity than anything else. The Pilgrims were driven by deep Christian conviction and they sought above all things to establish a society that would live out the comprehensive truth of Christianity—what we would now call a Christian worldview. By contrast, Howard Dean reveals himself to be a secularist at heart, regardless of denominational affiliation. He may identify with something like the “Social Gospel” popular among Protestant liberals of the early twentieth century, but his positions

on homosexuality, abortion, and a host of other issues place him far outside the worldview of Americans who believe that faith should influence public policy.

Dean's secularism has offended some liberal Christians as well. Jim Wallis, founder of *Sojourners* magazine, criticized Dean and his fellow Democratic candidates in an op-ed column published in *The New York Times*. With the exception of Senator Joseph Lieberman, Wallis noted that the Democratic candidates "seem uncomfortable with the subject of religion." Wallis made his concerns about Governor Dean abundantly clear: "Howard Dean, the leading challenger to President Bush, illustrates the Democrats' problem. Dr. Dean recently said he left his church in Vermont over dispute about a bike path, and explained that his faith does not inform his politics. He has also said the presidential race should stay away from the issues of 'guns, God and gays' and focus on jobs, healthcare and foreign policy." As Wallis knows, this will not wash with the American electorate. Indeed, Wallis argues that Howard Dean's approach will allow conservative Christians to define the terms of the debate.

Gov. Dean may claim to be a "pretty religious" person and a church member, but he doesn't seem to know much about Christianity. Oddly, he doesn't seem to understand how little he knows. Talking to a reporter from *The New York Times* last week, Dean was asked to name his favorite New Testament book. He named the book of Job, which is, of course, not in the New Testament. The candidate had just claimed to know something about the Bible. Reflecting on a trip to Israel, Dean said, "If you know much about the Bible—which I do—to see and be in a place where Christ was and understand the intimate history of what was going on 2,000 years ago is an exceptional experience."

Dean also said that he doesn't like the way the book ends, apparently thinking that the book leaves Job in torment and despair. When reminded that the book of Job is found in the Old Testament and that Job is returned to health, family, and prosperity, Dean claimed that there are various versions of Job: "It's been a long time since I looked at this, but it's believed that was added much, much later. Many people believe that the original ending was about the power of God and the power of God was almighty and all knowing and it wasn't necessary that everybody was going to be redeemed." There is simply no intelligent response to this gibberish.

Newsweek's Howard Fineman asked Dean, "Do you see Jesus Christ as the son of God and believe in him as the route to salvation and eternal life?" Dean answered: "I certainly see him as the son of God. I think whether I'm saved or not is not gonna be up to me."

That's not going to fly on the campaign trail. The American electorate may not be a constituency of Bible scholars and theologians, but voters know confusion when they see it. There is no way around the judgment that Howard Dean is desperately trying to re-invent himself for the national campaign. This is not just a question of political risk, but of personal character. Just who is Howard Dean—and does he even know himself?

In an informative statement made to CNN's Judy Woodruff, Dean revealed the awkwardness of his situation. "One thing I feel about religion, you have to be very careful not to be a hypocrite if you're a religious person. It's really tough to preach one thing and do something else. And I don't think you can do that." It will be most interesting to see if Howard Dean remembers those words as he presses his new "Jesus agenda" on the campaign trail. As Governor Dean said so clearly, "I don't think you can do that."

