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Politics or idolatry (Fr. John Garvey)

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Photo by Tim Pierce

There is a cliché floating around that people drop as if it were a self-evident truth—a category that may not exist, despite our Declaration of Independence. In anything involving religion, morals, medical ethics, or sexuality, whatever you choose to do is “between you and your God.”

Euthanize comatose grandpa? This decision is between you and your God. (Grandpa’s God is presumably as out of it as grandpa is.) A woman’s decision to abort is between her and her God, and how a man chooses to worship, or whether to worship at all, is between him and his God.

Here we are: back at polytheism. All these gods—mine, yours, hers, his, theirs—are the result of a combination of secularism gone to an extreme, combined with individualism and a sentimental form of civic religion. Completely absent is the idea that one of these gods could turn out to be real, and might make demands, and that there could be serious consequences if we do not obey them.

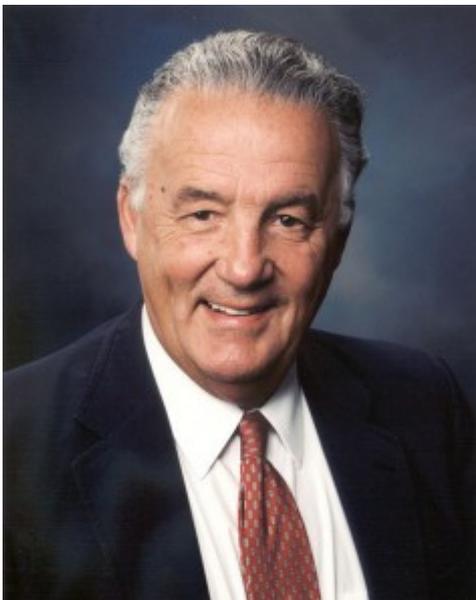
This “between you and your God” language comes up mainly in political contexts, usually in defense of a prochoice position, but the fact that it is so frequently accepted without debate shows that its effects are everywhere. The god invoked here is plainly a reflection of its possessor, and can be counted on to affirm its

owner's every longing or whim.

Those unlucky enough to feel obliged to vote this November will have to choose between a man whose god has no problem with the near-infanticide of late-term abortions and a man whose god was not displeased with hundreds of killed Texas prisoners, not to speak of dead GIs and Iraqis. Am I saying that my god knows better than theirs? No. I am saying that any time any politician says anything about God and our relationship to God we should realize that we are being used, and idolatry is afoot. And we should loathe what we have been offered as a choice.

But religion can work badly in another direction. When Catholic bishops say that they will deny Communion to those politicians who support what is euphemistically called "a woman's right to choose" (the Lexus or the Buick? To kill or not to kill?) they enter a fraught area.

Without getting into the subject of their own moral credibility (a more serious question than some bishops seem to realize), they do in fact have the obligation to be clear about the fact that some of the church's teachings are not just oddities of your faith's form of observance-days of fast and abstinence, for example-but have universal import. Abortion and capital punishment are not the same things as no meat on Friday. The bishops have not done a good job of making that argument, though they seem to think they have.



Senator Paul Sarbanes

But here there is a weird selectivity. Until prochoice and pro-capital-punishment Republican politicians like Rudy Giuliani, George Pataki, and Arnold Schwarzenegger are mentioned by the bishops in the same breath as the offending

Democrats, the Wasps who always wait in the wings to emerge as neonativists will be able to say that the Vatican will forever try to control American politics. And Kerry will be able to show what a brave guy he is by defying the bishops, which is about as brave as telling Sister Wilhelmina that you think she's a meanie.

As an Orthodox Christian who does not believe in using Communion as a common means of discipline-though no one has a right to Communion, rights being a stupid category where the sacraments are concerned, and priests really should refuse Communion in some cases-I am not in a position to inform Catholic bishops or laypeople about how they should approach Roman Catholic discipline. But people who say they believe that the life of a conceived child is human and matters, and this is what Catholics and Orthodox believe, should not support political platforms that are callous or indifferent about this; and they really should think twice about receiving the body and blood of one who died for all human beings, including killed fetuses and executed criminals. The bishops are surely not wrong to affirm this.



Senator Olympia Snowe

I have mentioned the worry that the heavy-handedness of a few bishops will raise the old nativist specter that the pope will try to control Catholic politicians. But there is another and deeper consideration here. To what extent can a person who is seriously at odds with the direction of a culture sign off on the most murderous aspects of that culture, in order to accomplish lesser goods? In other words, in order to raise the minimum wage you vote (because it's the Democratic Party line) to allow late-term abortions? Some months ago, the Orthodox Peace Fellowship sent letters to Senators Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), both Orthodox who cast consistently prochoice votes, challenging their record in this regard, and asking for some explanation of their position. The letters remain

unanswered.

Catholics, Orthodox, and others who are troubled by this issue should not leave it to the bishops to challenge prochoice Democrats or pro-capital-punishment members of either party. Like the largely lay membership of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, they should challenge the politicians themselves. Isn't that part of what the priesthood of the laity is all about?

This article was first published by [Commonweal](#), on June 4, 2004, and is posted here with permission.

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