

Opinion Story

Tapu Misa: Christians when it suits

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By [Tapu Misa](#)

Do politicians deserve to go to heaven? That is the question the serious-minded Australia Institute asked when it tried to gauge what Australians thought of the moral rectitude of their political leaders.

Not much, apparently. John Howard fared worst of six prominent politicians. He was deemed to have even less of the right moral stuff required for heavenly entry than Pauline Hanson, despite her distinct lack of love for immigrants. The politicians voted most likely to gain heavenly admission were Labor Environment Minister Peter Garrett, followed by Greens leader Bob Brown, then Labor leader Kevin Rudd.

It remains to be seen whether votes for heaven translate to votes for government office. Which brings me to the occasion that caused much sniggering and hilarity in some quarters and groans of embarrassment in others – the bumbling birth of the Christian party.

If there was ever a convincing argument against religious groups seeking political power it was the reconfigured Destiny Party's inept launch. I'm sure the well-meaning folk at Destiny are good at many things, but on the strength of last week's performance politics isn't one of them.

That's not to say that the religiously minded shouldn't get involved in politics. It's how they get involved that's important. Politics is a dirty business; faith shouldn't be. Take the attempt by Exclusive Brethren businessmen to influence the last election. That episode sullied the Brethren and the party they aimed to support.

What role, if any, should faith play in a world increasingly obsessed with religious fundamentalism and the separation of church and state?

Nowhere is this more hotly debated than the United States, with a born-again Christian in the White House and presidential hopefuls making public declarations of their faith – yes, John McCain, Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama are all Christians.

Even Billy Graham, the famous preacher who became spiritual guide to a succession of Presidents, regarded politics as an "ugly" fact of life and warned of the dangers of getting too close to political power.

In *The Preacher and the Presidents*, the authors say there were times when the association brought out the worst in Graham, "most notoriously in the hideous February 1972 conversation in which [Richard] Nixon went on about how the Jews who controlled the media were destroying the country and Graham went along. It was an exchange so vile, it raised the legitimate question of what exactly a President would have to do for Graham to stop consoling and begin confronting him on moral grounds".

Graham came to the conclusion that "evangelicals can't be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand in the middle, to preach to all the people, right and left. I haven't been faithful to my own advice in the past. I will in the future".

But the religious leaders who followed him appeared not to heed that advice and many have been beguiled by the seductive overtures of the White House into compromising their political independence.



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American preacher Jim Wallis believes the religious right made the same mistake by aligning itself so closely with George W. Bush that it forgot its "religious and moral roots" and stopped questioning whether Bush's policies matched his public expressions of piety.

Wallis believes Bush to be a sincere Christian but guilty of "bad theology". He describes Bush's lack of support for poor working families as "a religious failure", and argues that Jesus' top priorities would not have been "a capital gains tax cut and the occupation of Iraq".

"God is not a Republican or a Democrat, and the best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable or loyally partisan but to maintain the moral independence to critique both the left and the right," Wallis writes in *God's Politics*. That is not to agree with those who want politicians and citizens to keep their religion to themselves. But to influence a democratic society, Wallis argues, religious groups must win the public debate about why the policies they advocate are better for the common good rather than become embroiled in the mechanics of government.

The shining example is the civil rights movement in the US, which was "morally based and politically independent". It was the sheer moral force of the arguments advanced by Dr Martin Luther King jnr – who campaigned for civil rights with a *Bible* in one hand and the constitution in the other – that won public support.

"The civil rights movement was proven right in operating out of its spiritual strength and letting its political influence flow from its moral influence. Other great social causes led by religious communities – abolition of slavery, child labour reform, women's suffrage, and so on – all followed the same strategy".

But religion can be a cause for ill as well as good. The fact that Martin Luther King and the Ku Klux Klan took their cues from the *Bible* shows how ill-founded some religious interpretations can be.

As Wallis says: "We must always acknowledge that our religious traditions can be both a cause for oppression and an inspiration for liberation.

"Religious arguments have fostered terrible sectarian division, hatred, and violence, but faith has also helped to set people free. We must be honest about both. In the very same traditions that have been used to sanction injustice are found the seeds of justice, peace, and freedom."