

FRIST & DELAY: INSULTING OUR RELIGIONS - AND OUTLAWING THEIR PRACTICE

By ARTHUR WASKOW

Several politicians have spent the last month insulting my religious beliefs and the religious beliefs of millions of Americans. What's far worse, they are trying to impose their own religion on us by imposing it on lifetime federal judges.

No, they didn't call for the outlawing of Judaism, or Unitarianism, or Methodism. But they are trying to put outside the law the practice of any religious beliefs about birth and death other than their own.

There is nothing wrong with bringing a religious worldview to bear on political issues. I do it all the time. But there is something utterly wrong when powerful politicians define one religious view as the only truth, cast contempt on other religious paths as "anti-faith" and seek to impose their own religious views on the body politic -- especially on judges, the crucial constitutional bulwark of independence and freedom.

That is what Senator Majority Leader Bill Frist and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay are doing. They are seeking to make one religious belief the touchstone of which judges should be appointed and what kind of rulings they should hand down. It was to prevent this kind of abuse of power that the framers of the Constitution forbade requiring a "religious test" of any official, and it is why the First Amendment forbids an "establishment of religion."

Simply put, the strategic goal of these politicians is to impose their own religious faiths upon the country by imposing it on the courts.

First they tried to do that in the Terri Schiavo case by directing federal judges to impose a right-wing religious view, even when a wide variety of state courts had ruled that Schiavo's husband had the authority to express her own religious and ethical intention.

But that didn't work. The very federal courts they had tried to use refused to follow orders by imposing this Bush-Frist-DeLay religious diktat. Although acting independent-minded is what American judges are supposed to do, DeLay threatened retaliation.

To pursue their goal of establishing their religion as state policy, these politicians need more compliant judges, ones of their own ilk. But more basically, they know that all political majorities are temporary, evanescent. Since they want to give their own religious views a permanent hold on the country, they decided to use their present majority, tiny and temporary as it is, to impose lifetime federal judges on the future.

That meant threatening to get rid of traditional Senate rules that give 41 senators the power to prevent confirmation of judges and to instead put in place a rule that would let 50 senators plus Vice President Dick Cheney confirm appointments. They themselves call this the "nuclear option." Small wonder, for it would "nuke" the judicial independence that is crucial to freedom in America.

And when a number of senators began to resist this effort, they really did go nuclear. Frist agreed to take part in a national televised extravaganza that is accusing those who oppose this "nuclear option" of being "enemies of faith."

This goes beyond rooting a political choice in one's own religious faith. It denies that one's opponents have any religious faith at all.

So support for this rules change is the only really "Christian" stance. Opponents are not just followers of a different faith - they are enemies of faith itself.

We might hope that a powerful politician would take more care not to demonize those whose religious beliefs differ from his own. Yet while Frist probably did not originally frame the televised event, he has had a week to distance himself from its rhetoric - but has chosen not to.

It is not the first time that he has over-reached. We might have hoped that a senator with a medical degree would have thought twice before diagnosing a patient he had never seen except on television. Yet that is exactly what he did with Schiavo, denouncing the diagnoses of skilled specialists who were actually treating her.

Frist's involvement in his latest religious tantrum has, thank God, crossed a red line in the American body politic. More and more Americans are coming to realize that the Senator has overstepped his bounds as an elected official.

But that is little cause for relief in the basic struggle for our country's future. Even if Frist apologizes or DeLay uses slicker language, we can be sure that they will still try to impose their own religious dogma on the courts, and through the courts upon the nation.

Our own religion, our own ethic, our own passion for justice and compassion, must prevent them.