

# Most political rhetoric keeps God-talk light & sunny

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**By G. Jeffrey MacDonald**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As Campaign 2006 heats up, politicians are leveraging the power of religious rhetoric while adhering to what's become the cardinal rule for public religious speech in the 21st century: Never say God gets angry.

After the emergence of so-called "values voters" in 2004, political figures on both the left and right haven't been shy this year about invoking a Judeo-Christian deity.

[Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill.](#), has helped lead a Democratic recovery of spiritual language by describing, for instance, in a speech this summer how he felt while "kneeling beneath the cross" and explaining, "You need Christ precisely because you have sins to wash away."

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Sen.  
Barack  
Obama,  
D-Ill.

On the GOP side, Ohio gubernatorial candidate [Ken Blackwell](#) told a crowd: “Rights are not grants from government. They are gifts from God.”

Yet when describing their faiths and their gods, politicians of all stripes have apparently learned to leave prevalent biblical ideas about divine punishment inside the church or temple. The reason, according to journalism scholars, is simple: Journalists who used to ignore such remarks from public figures now deem them worthy of national coverage—and consequently, public shaming.

Reporters “are saying, ‘I’ve got to warn the public that there are people out there like that,’” said Judith Buddenbaum, a retired journalism professor and author of [Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists](#).

Stakes are high in elections, Buddenbaum says, in part because a theology of judgment “plays havoc on any kind of international relations, unless your goal is to get to Armageddon.”

As proven in recent years, one reference to an angry God can make an otherwise humdrum local story go national overnight. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin proved the point earlier this year, as he joined Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as public figures who have apologized under pressure for linking natural disasters with divine displeasure.

Even relative unknowns, like Alabama state Sen. Hank Erwin, manage to make the national news wires with public gaffes—soon after Hurricane Katrina hit, Erwin suggested sinful behavior “ultimately brings the

judgment of God.”

Americans haven't always been so offended by the idea of divine judgment. The first colonial settlers fasted on “Days of Humiliation” to appease a punitive God whom they thought sent drought in retribution for their sins.

Abraham Lincoln maintained the tradition with a proclamation on April 30, 1863, by asking, “May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins ... ?”

Market forces help explain the shift, said [Carol Pardun](#), a scholar of religion coverage and director of the journalism program at Middle Tennessee State University. She said reporters increasingly have seized on angry God references over the past 20 years, not because such remarks are more common, but because they trigger strong emotions that sell news.

“Public discourse has changed (in recent years as) the language in newspapers has become more polarizing” in order to keep readers engaged, Pardun said. “Religion, like politics, gets people up in arms,” and sound bytes referring to a “mean God” sell newspapers.

Editorial writers have taken a lead role in deeming certain theologies unacceptable. *The Boston Globe*, for instance, rapped Nagin for trying to hide behind God's will.

“If God is intent on wreaking havoc on the Gulf Coast, as Nagin suggested, who could blame the mayor if the response to the disaster was ineffective or if rebuilding plans haven't advanced very far?” the *Globe* wrote in an editorial earlier this year. “God, it would seem, is being used as a shield for individual shortcomings. ... Those who think they know the divine might better show it by their actions to help others, not by invoking his name as a punishment or excuse.”

Some in religious circles welcome how the secular press has stepped up to police the doctrinal boundaries of public discourse. Among the grateful is Fred Plummer, executive director of the Seattle-based [Center for Progressive Christianity](#).

“It’s dangerous if we don’t ferret this (belief system) out” through widespread coverage when officials or candidates invoke a disapproving God, Plummer said. “Some of these outlandish public policy positions based on religious convictions need to be questioned.”

His example: If the press had revealed James Watt’s apocalyptic beliefs during his tenure as secretary of the interior in the 1980s, the public might have understood why, in Plummer’s opinion, he didn’t promote far-sighted environmental policies.

“His main job was to see that ecological protection was carried out,” Plummer said. “His Christian beliefs were that the world is coming to an end, so why worry about it?”

Some on the religious left, however, say the press as theological watchdog has gone too far. The press has no idea which theologies are dangerous because there is no forum in which they can take the public pulse, according to Madison Shockley, pastor of [Pilgrim United Church of Christ](#) in Carlsbad, Calif., and a former candidate for Los Angeles city council.

“The question is this: Where is theology discussed in public?,” Shockley asks. “How do you measure public tolerance for diversity of theological views when there are no public theological exchanges? Most theological exchanges are quite private.”

Some journalism scholars contend the public does have some agreed-upon religious values that the press tries to reflect in coverage of religious remarks. For [Ari Goldman](#), who teaches religion reporting at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, Americans generally agree “it’s

an obscenity for anyone to say they know God's will."

In Pardun's view, the "public conscience" expects a certain degree of safe, predictable and non-offensive values to be expressed in the public square. When it comes to politics and religion, that means a God of love and comfort, but never one of punishment.

That relatively new standard isn't apt to change again anytime soon—at least not as long as the press is keeping a watchful eye.

People "think they can handle religious diversity" in public discourse, Pardun says. "But they really can't."

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