MC GOVERN

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From the perspective of Religion and Society, which is the area in which I teach, the choice in the forthcoming election seems to me to be embarrassingly clear. Embarrassingly--since we normally would expect to be identifying all manner of complexities and fine distinctions in the political arena, which is one of the things that makes the study of Religion and Society so interesting. But our choice this time, it seems to me, is obvious: McGovern.

Of course we are not faced here with a simplistic choice between a bad guy and a good guy; that kind of distinction always represents faulty ethical thinking. But we are faced with a choice between a candidate who seems to be driven chiefly by expediency (using power for the sake of staying in power, mainly) and who has chained himself to vested, wealthy interests, and a candidate who has a strong sense for social justice and who is not owned by anyone.

Nixon might, by some standards, deserve an A for personal piety and good intentions; but he surely flunks by the standard of results. The central ethical criterion of social justice seems to be toward the bottom of his value priorities. Nixon does not really understand or empathize with the poor and the oppressed. McGovern is, to be sure, untested as president, by definition; and he has made some miscalculations, (fewer than some of his self-righteous critics maintain, however) and, anyway, from the perspective of Religion and Society, we don't expect perfection, even in ministers' sons). Overall, McGovern is committed to the cause of the poor and the oppressed, at home and abroad, and that makes all the difference, particularly in comparison to Nixon. (Admittedly, if your chief concern is that the oil industry should

keep its depletion allowance, you shouldn't vote for McGovern; but, then, you might want to reexamine your ethics.) McGovern is a political realist; he is not some starry-eyed idealist. Remember, he stayed with Johnson for some time, trying to "work within the system" to end the war, only breaking with LBJ when there was no alternative;. Many other similar examples of McGovern's realistic , responsible "situation ethics" could be adduced.

For four years Nixon has sustained a murderous war, allowing 20,000 Americans to die, killing and dislocating and maiming millions of Asians, all with the support of the insidious racist ideology of "Vietnamization" (yellow-skinned corpses are okay). True, he did visit China and Russia. (When he makes a total about-face on a position he's taken for two decades, during which he had virulently castigated his opponents, he is cheered for being "pragmatic".) Yet, given his sometimes rabidly nationalist proclivities and his favoritism for the corporate capitalistic giants, we must ask who is really to benefit from those visits to China and Russia besides the big corporations and the agri-business people? Is world peace that much closer? Hopefully it is; but the elitist power brokers of the nation state during the nineteenth century also were "pragmatic," and that eventually led to two World Wars. Other memorable foreign policy strokes by Nixon have included his selling thousands of people in Bangladesh down the river to starvation (no government relief) in order to keep his personal pique with Mrs. Ghandi going and to allow Kissinger to fly to China through Pakistan. (By the way, why is it patriotic to support dictators like the former ruler of Pakistan, not to speak of Thieu?)

Domestically, Nixon has sought to roll back many of the achievements of the civil rights struggles of the sixties. He has blown up the issue of

bussing to be a propagandistic smokescreen, in order to appeal to racist instincts, when he might have been seeking to offer some moral leadership. He has sought to undermine the integrity of the court system, especially the Supreme Court: Carswell, Hainsworth, remember? He is buddy-buddy with most of the special interests, IT &T and all the rest, to the point that they are getting special deals at the expense of the average taxpayer, not to mention the poverty-stricken. He is unconcerned with massive moral corruption in his own political bedroom. He is running a closed, PR campaign; he is not accessible to the press for questioning; he has taken a stance above the people.

McGovern stands in sharp contrast to Nixon at practically every significant ethical point. He has been one of the most responsible critics of the war in American politics. He has been willing to hear the Third World call for America to stop being "the world policeman" (which is something radically different from isolationism); and he has at the same time realized that the way for the U.S. to be strong internationally is not so much to be able to bomb the hell out of the planet twenty times over, but to be a citadel of peace and justice for all. McGovern's campaign, likewise, has been one of the most open in recent memory. The press has access to his financial records and his political plans. (Much of McGovern's alleged "mismanaging" of his campaign is simply due to his unwillingness to hide behind the PR image-makers in isolated secrecy and deception.) Our democracy needs a leader who believes in it.

McGovern, above all, has realized that our society will be best served if those at the lower levels of the socio-economic scale get a bigger share

of the national pie. To this end, McGovern will judiciously cut back on military spending, forthrightly seek to plug huge tax loopholes, and resolutely seek to convert our economy to a peacetime economy. To be sure, McGovern has a lot to spell out concerning the details of his program, and a few things to learn (e.g. concerning the consumption/production mania of this society and the rising ecological crisis). But I take it to be an indubitable ethical principle that it's better to be unsurely and hesitatingly on the way to the right goal than to be hopelessly bogged down in the muck of a road that is going nowhere.

One final observation, regarding a particularly important ethical issue, American policy toward Israel. On the immediate bread-and-butter level (e.g. supplying arms to Israel to keep a balance of power), I do not think that McGovern can be faulted. The real issue for responsible supporters of Israel, it seems to me, is who will provide the political leadership in America which will take this nation out of the old era of nationalistic Realpolitik and imperalism--a politics which represents a profound threat to the security of every nation everywhere--into the new era of internationalism and pluralism. Israel's stake, it seems to me, must be with the healthy stability of the new era, rather than with the balance-of-terror stability of the old era. And McGovern is surely better equipped, by his moral vision and his sense of political responsibility, to take us all into that new era than Nixon, who bears all the characteristic traits of a broker of the old era.