

Vulnerability and the Possibility of Progress: Reflections on a Workshop **By David Newheiser**

At the outset of his remarks to the University of Chicago Theology Workshop Richard Land commented, "I find it far more interesting to be around people I disagree with than people I agree with - I learn a lot more." He clearly anticipated a hostile reception from the students and faculty in attendance, and not without reason: the conservative politics and habits of thought of this Baptist minister were in the minority that day. Nevertheless, the position he presented found more sympathy among those who attended than he expected - by the end of the session, Land remarked that the generous tone of our conversation was itself an achievement. Since the public discussion of religion and politics in America is shaped by sharply-drawn battle lines, the act of setting polemics aside for an hour and a half demonstrated that other sorts of encounter are possible, even between those who disagree. Unfortunately, however, enough distrust remained that the conversation failed to truly engage the difficult areas of difference that remained.

Since Richard Land's work within his church and in Washington seems far removed from the realm of academic theology, he might have seemed like an odd visitor, but I judged that our work and his have significant lessons to offer each other. As the workshop's coordinator, I invited Land in the hopes of bringing academic reflection on the place of religion in the public sphere into

conversation with the actual practice of Christian intervention in American politics - a conversation that seems to me to be urgently important. Whereas academic theology often operates at a remove from public discourse, this separation diminishes both domains, for their interaction may be energizing and mutually illuminating.

By virtue of his significant media presence and his leadership in America's largest Protestant denomination, Richard Land has helped shape the role of evangelical Christianity in American politics. Because his career, which includes a DPhil from Oxford, demonstrates an appreciation for academic rigor, he seemed like a particularly promising interlocutor, especially since his most recent book - *The Divided States of America: What Liberals and Conservatives Are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match* - advocates for a moderate alternative to hackneyed polemics. A panel including Rick Elgendy, Clark Gilpin, and Kathryn Tanner responded to Land in light of their diverse work in critical theory, history, and theology. Because Land is an unusually circumspect representative of the religious right, it was my hope that a conversation might emerge that was both intellectually rigorous and sensitive to the complicated practice of political life; in the event, this proved difficult for surprising reasons.

Speaking in an informal style, with illustrations that appeared to be drawn from his homiletic career, Land argued in his lecture that the U.S. government ought neither to promote nor to preclude the public exercise of religion.

Although an analogy comparing American society to beef jerky seemed ill-

suiting to the occasion, the thrust of his argument met with broad sympathy.

After all, since many members of the Divinity School community are invested in the possibility of Christian action in the public sphere, many of those present are unlikely to support attempts to purge public discourse of religious categories, nor would they likely favor proposals that suggest the political establishment of Christian faith. Many aspects of Land's position remained problematic - for instance, the point of the jerky example, that "we [Christians] are to stop the decay" of society, was likely unconvincing to an audience that was not limited to churchpersons - but the moderation of his position was widely appreciated.

Against the background of this commonality, a set of nuanced questions emerged more clearly. The panelists pressed questions concerning (among other things) the character and accuracy of Land's appeal to American history, the danger that the civic engagement Land envisaged would devolve into a civil religion, and the particular responsibilities of Christians within the public realm.

Where Land seemed to anticipate hostility from those wishing to defend American politics from Christian interventions, many of the questions pressed him to reflect further on a specifically Christian political action. Unfortunately, though, Land's defensive posture seemed to leave him reluctant to explore the open questions that would have led further and deeper into the issues at hand.

Instead of extending and revising his account in response to new questions, Land stayed to his script, appealing to stock examples, in service of a predetermined position. For this reason, though, the position he defended was

much less convincing than it otherwise might have been.

Perhaps the most charged moment in the conversation came when a member of the audience called into question whether Land's categorical opposition to abortion was consistent with his support of the death penalty. Land's answer repeated a claim commonly made by defenders of capital punishment, that it is the outraged response of those who love life most against those who devalue it, without really addressing the irony of this standpoint. It would be difficult, to be sure, to jeopardize long-held opinions by reflecting freely in such a context, especially since evangelicals such as Land feel themselves to be frequently embattled, and yet such openness was called for by the sympathetic but critical questions that arose. Although on this occasion civility itself represented a significant achievement, the mutual distrust that remained worked counter the cause of the vulnerability that is the regrettably rare hallmark of intellectual life.