

Render Unto Mike

I met Michael Cromartie in 1985 at Windy Gap, a Christian retreat in North Carolina. As a recent convert, I was there to talk about the only religious subject about which I knew anything: how I happened to become a Christian in my 30s after having been blasé about religion for years. Mike was way ahead of me in the Christianity department.

Nonetheless, we soon got to be close friends. We both worked in Washington, lived in Virginia, and wound up attending the same church, the Falls Church. One thing I learned about Mike was that he'd spent a year commuting to Philadelphia to work as the mascot Hoops, a mixture of the Roadrunner and a chicken, for the 76ers, the city's NBA basketball team. Pretty cool, I thought. Mike and I had similar interests—sports, politics, Christianity.

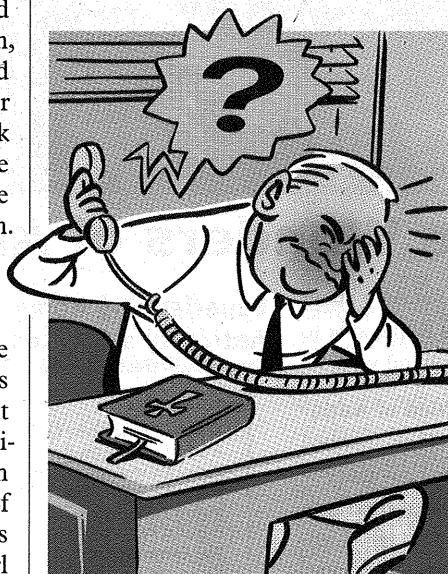
A few months before we met, Mike had applied for a job with the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a small but high-powered think tank. In his application, Mike noted his friendship with theologian Carl Henry, and the head of the center, Ernest Lefever, brought this up when he interviewed Mike. "Carl Henry came to my wedding," Mike told him. "Carl Henry's on our board," Lefever replied. "That's why I dropped his name," Mike said. He got the job.

His title was director of evangelical studies. This was a growing field in the 1980s, and Mike was (and still is) one of its few experts. The Christian Right had suddenly emerged as an important player in national politics. Yet its leaders and their motivations were not well known, especially to the press.

"I kept getting more and more calls from very smart writers who knew nothing about faith and religious beliefs," Mike says. He was amazed at their ignorance. They didn't know a fundamentalist from a Pentecostal or an evangelical.

In the late 1990s, Southern Baptists were caught up in a highly publicized debate on the proper relationship between men and women. This prompted a reporter for the *New York Times*—Mike won't divulge the name—to call and ask why the Baptists were making such fools of themselves.

"Well," Mike said, "it says in Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 22..." (the passage says, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands"). The



reporter stopped him with, "Who's the author of that? Who wrote it? Who published it?" At that point, "I realized I'd have to start at the beginning," Mike says.

A producer for CBS News asked Mike about the Christian Right: "Are they taking over the country?" No, Mike said. They're not even taking over the Republican party.

Mike didn't throw up his hands in despair. He likes and respects reporters and political writers, even those with whom he disagrees heartily.

Luis Lugo, who runs the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, was in sync with Mike on the need to educate the press on religion. They started with

lunches, funded by Pew, in Washington that brought experts on religion together with a dozen or more print and TV reporters and writers.

Then Lugo told Mike, "Think bigger." The result was the Faith Angle Conference series. "The idea is to get mostly academics, but practitioners too, to explain some area of religion and public life to help journalists do their jobs better," Mike says. "This is not a hook to get them into a Bible study. It's not to convert anybody."

The conferences, which focus on three subjects over two days, started in Maine in 2002, then moved to Key West. Mike has recruited experts on Mormonism, Islam, Reinhold Niebuhr, and science and Christianity. Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California was a speaker.

Last week's conference was held in Miami's South Beach. James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia argued Christian conservatives are undermining their cause by "politicizing values." David Gelernter of Yale insisted many Jews have adopted "obsessive liberalism" as a secular religion. Rabbi David Saperstein disagreed. Philip Jenkins of Penn State said disputes over homosexuality are indigenous to African Christianity, not exported to Africa by American Christians.

The conferences are, I believe, a rare recent example of the quality of journalism being improved. One participant, Adrian Wooldridge of the *Economist*, wrote in his book *God Is Back*, coauthored with John Micklethwait, that they are "one of the most pleasant as well as one of the most instructive experiences in journalism."

The question is whether the conferences will continue. Pew sponsored the first ten, then withdrew, and Mike scraped together funding from several sources for the eleventh in Miami. "There's not anybody, anywhere in the world, doing this," he says. And no one will be if the Cromartie conferences are sidelined.

FRED BARNES